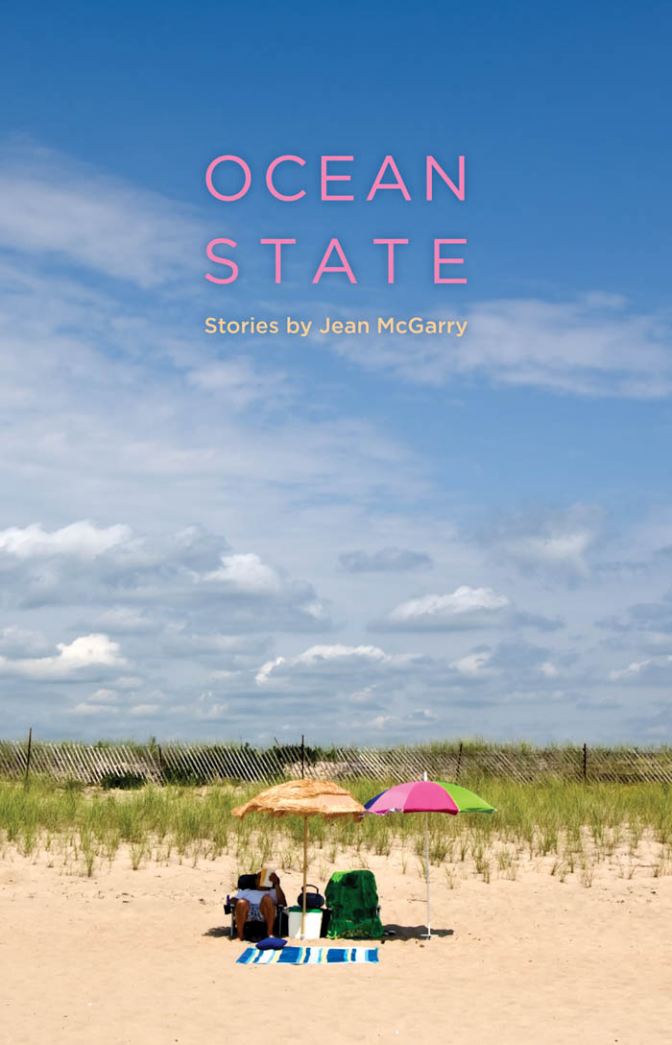
OCEAN STATE

Stories by Jean McGarry



VISIT…

OCEAN STATE

OCEAN

Johns Hopkins: Poetry and Fiction
John T. Irwin, General Editor

STATE

Stories by Jean McGarry

The Johns Hopkins University Press
Baltimore

This book has been brought to publication with the generous assistance of the G. Harry Pouder Fund.

© 2010 The Johns Hopkins University Press
All rights reserved. Published 2010
Printed in the United States of America on
acid-free paper
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Johns Hopkins University Press
2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363
www.press.jhu.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
McGarry, Jean.
Ocean state : stories / by Jean McGarry.
p. cm. — (Johns Hopkins, poetry and fiction)
ISBN-13: 978-0-8018-9658-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-8018-9658-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Rhode Island—Social life and customs—Fiction.
I. Title.
PS3563.C3636O23 2010
813'.54—dc22 2009048413

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book. For more information, please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or specialsales@press.jhu.edu.

The Johns Hopkins University Press uses environmentally friendly book materials, including recycled text paper that is composed of at least 30 percent post-consumer waste, whenever possible. All of our book papers are acid-free, and our jackets and covers are printed on paper with recycled content

For Jill Berkowitz

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

FAMILY HAPPINESS

Family Happiness 3
The Sweetness of Her Name 30
The Tree of Life 42

TRANSFERENCE

Transference 57
Gold Leaf 77
A Full House 90

THE WEDDING GOWNS

The Wedding Gowns 109
Family Romance 126
The Offering 136

OCEAN STATE

Dream Date 153
Welcome Wherever He Went 173
The Night Before 192
Ocean State 202

Acknowledgments 215

This page intentionally left blank

Family Happiness

[1]

When Donna was first married, her mother collected linens and kitchen tools enough for three houses, and where was Donna moving with her blond husband, a contractor, but a third-floor tenement on Regent Avenue. When it became available in May, Dolly was in that flat from dawn to dusk, papering and painting, laying linoleum and scrubbing woodwork. Dolly was sewing Donna's going-away outfit, a navy suit with flared skirt and two changes of blouse: flowered and solid. The gown and veil were bought from New York Lace, and Dolly was doing the fitting, first on the dress form, and then—when she could catch her—on Donna, who shouldn't have been gaining weight, but was. She was a nervous, high-strung, silly girl, and the wedding, in planning for a solid year, had burned off what maturity she'd gathered, necking and petting with Carl Linstrom, twenty-five, the only son of the Swansea Linstroms, one generation off the boat. The Linstroms and Bergmans were congregants at St. Lucy's Lutheran, and bride and groom had known each other since bible school.

They would be married by the Rev. Albert Oberg, standing before the birch altar shipped over from the old country when the church was little more than a dream and a hope in a region settled by a mere handful of Swedes. Everything was working out as planned.

Dolly went to the apartment alone most days and was glad to have the time to rearrange the knick-knacks or the cabinets after Donna—or maybe it was Carl, or even Carl's mother—had snuck in to see the place and things were moved, or glasses were used and left in the sink. This upset Dolly. Her cheeks would flush and tears flood her eyes: ingratitude was deeply rooted in her only daughter, and came from Einar's family and she knew exactly where, but didn't want to think of the suppers and teas and church picnics when it had flared out from her mother-in-law's black heart and stung, cut, and all but poisoned the first year of Dolly's marriage.

The first thing Dolly did was let the light in, pulling the cord on the Venetian blinds—some green, some white, some off-white—wiped and dusted every few days. The slivered daylight, cool and weak, striped the linoleum—black, white, and red, a dizzying pattern, but a bargain in a single, fresh bolt.

Was marriage a gamble with such a one as her Donna? Stay out of it, Einar had said and said again, as needed, and she knew that much, although Donna could read her mind, and when she saw *that* written on it, she threatened to move out on the spot and in with Carl in his railroad flat next to the lumberyard. "Oh no, you will not!" she said that terrible Sunday after the bride's dinner for the groom's family. And, "Oh yes, I will so," Donna shot back. And, "Don't talk back to your mother," they heard coming from the den, where Einar had fled, hiding behind the

paper and a cloud of smoke. They laughed to hear that rarest of signal from the head of the household, and the matter was forgotten for a minute. What happened was this: after all the goodbyes were said, and half a Boston cream pie packaged for Mrs. Linstrom, and before Donna flew off to meet Carl at the bowling alley, Dolly had sat her daughter down for a heart-to-heart talk, something her own mother had failed to do, leaving everything after the wedding a mystery and a darkness. She knew a thing or two about a Swedish husband was how the talk began, and Donna had laughed. "I'm sorry, Momma," she said, with a hand over that fresh mouth. "Tell me. What do you know?"

Dolly was mortified. She flushed and steamed in silence until Donna brought her a glass of cold water and an aspirin, and kissed her—a rarity—and she calmed down, never that easy once she got started. "What I was trying to tell you, before you laughed at me—," she glared, and Donna glared back, and they got nowhere.

The frustration—the eighteen years of unspent energy—leaked into other areas, best left untouched, such as Dolly's real opinion of Donna's wifeliness, and how much she had to learn if she thought marriage was just kisses and presents, but Donna was out of her seat, looking for her bag and cigarettes, and, by then, Dolly was crying and Einar in the room, stroking her strong back and laying his head on her head, a tender gesture, all his, that made her cry louder.

Dolly shook out a fresh cloth from the shopping bag of supplies. She'd equipped Donna's closets and cabinets with her favorite liquids, powders, waxes, and oils; real sponges and string mops, brooms of straw and dry mops. There was an old sheet she'd rip for dust cloths, but not yet. The wedding was in

twelve days, but she'd only been able to get at this place for a mere couple of weeks. It was nearly ready. Each room smelled of plaster, paint, turps, Ajax, beeswax, bleach, and ammonia, depending on where you sniffed. The place was immaculate. You could see that before you even drew a breath, so Dolly refolded her cheesecloth and sat on the brand-new lounge chair, draped in a bedspread. She rarely rested during the day, but it felt good to kick off the saddle shoes and close her eyes.

June weddings were the best, although no one her age had waited till June, or waited at all. Sometimes a girl was already expecting, so there was that, and no nice flat ready and waiting like this one. Backyards—if you had a decent one—served for the reception, and these weren't catered as Donna's would be. A gown was catch-as-catch-can and, of course, everyone sewed. Dolly had worn her cousin's ivory satin, shortened and let out at the seams. The veil was new, and Dolly shut her eyes tight to visualize the work of her own skillful hands. It was two yards of netting hemmed with scraps of lace—real lace borrowed from different girlfriends. She tacked on these laces in such a way that they blossomed from the net like tender greens from the earth. After the wedding, and the trip to Niagara, Dolly had unstitched each piece and returned it with a bundle of candied almonds. The dress itself was passed on to a friend and never returned. Dolly was a saver, a conserver, yet how many things were lost in this life? No one cared about old things. Donna didn't want anything old in her home. Everything had to be store-bought, and not just any store, so most of this furniture was bought on time with the husband, self-employed and no ball of fire, footing the bill. What would happen to them? She had shown Donna her own box of envelopes marked Gas and Electric, Christmas Club, Department Stores, Miscellany, each with its stack of

paid receipts, but Donna said that Carl wanted to handle the money and to her horror, Dolly heard that her own daughter, an only child and spoiled in every way, meant to hand over her paycheck every week! Was that love, as Donna said it was, or just another sign that Donna had learned nothing from eighteen years spent with a real homemaker, with a sharp eye on income and outflow. Einar was a skinflint, so outflow was their problem, solved eventually by tears, temper, and threats. He ended up handing over his own paycheck, and her signature passed muster at the bank. Every man had his problems, she wanted to tell Donna, so don't think you've found one who doesn't! Carl was a looker, and vain to boot. Those shirts he wore were sent out for laundering—anyone could see the press marks—and his clothes were not from Robert Hall or the mill outlet. He was a spender and he spent on himself. Did he have other vices?

They both smoked like chimneys and liked to nightclub. Who was he really, this Carl? She'd asked Einar this question, but he'd stop a minute, give Dolly a searching look, then go on with what he was doing. Einar was a man who loved a project, and that wasn't a bad thing, given what else was out there for married men. Einar was not a man to waste a minute, and she learned this lesson, a hard one, right after they were married and settled on the Bergmans' third floor. When there was nothing left to finish or fix in their attic, the whole house was painted inside and out; he then planted a vegetable garden in dirt that had never produced so much as a blade of grass. He pickled, he conserved, he baked pies. In the winter, he built models, repaired radios, and, later on, TVs. When they finally bought a house of their own, across the street from the Bergmans' three-decker, he started over: patio, garden, fruit trees, hifi. He built himself a shop in the basement and a darkroom. He got up early

for work, so no one saw him then, and stayed in the basement till bedtime. In short, he was never around. Was that a vice?

Dolly wasn't built for idleness either, so, that minute, she clambered up, fishing for her shoes, and noting that fifteen minutes had swept by, and nothing to show for it.

And yet, the flat was clean. Was it too clean? Sometimes her own house, her pride and joy, was too clean. The walls and woodwork and furniture loomed cold and bright, the dustless walls, shelves, and mirrors closed in on themselves; no fly or breeze or dustball stirred, and the secret idiocy of the place, its parts and members, glowed and vamped. Einar would be at work, climbing into manholes and tapping water pipes, and nothing would budge. Dolly was there, but she could barely breathe for the stillness. The kitchen and kettle and range to boil the water were steps away, with doorways in between, and she'd be standing stock still waiting for the will to break the silence, to push the air heavy with grains and particles, mists and aromatics. Something had to happen or she'd stand there all day with her eyes drying in their sockets. Move, she'd say to herself, or move it! as Einar would say, catching her the first few times, standing like a statue in their bedroom. Donna had never seen her like that, so she refused to believe her mother needed so long a stay in the hospital, a stay that might have lasted forever if they hadn't tried electric shock. None of that she remembered, before or after, but Einar had told her the facts. There were only a few of them, but enough to know what to avoid, what to sidestep, and what to try to forget. "Pray to God," her girlfriend said, the one who took Donna when Einar had to work, "it doesn't come back again." But Dolly had lost her feeling for God. She went to church on Sundays with the family, but her faith had dried right up. There was nothing in her mind where "He" used to be, either so sweet

and old, or so young and handsome. The long service seemed boring (and she'd never been bored in her life).

Coming home after that ordeal, Donna had seemed grown up to her. Instructed by Einar, she told her mother what to do and when to do it. Dolly adored her Donna, and always had, but even that felt different after the hospital. Where love had flowed in waves and floods, swirling around this child, now it felt thicker and slow, although she knew who they were to her. She knew because, without them, she was missing an arm or a leg. When you can't count on your own feeling, what can you count on? You can count, she'd told herself, lying in bed at night with Einar snoring away in peace beside her, on your arms and your legs.

If it happened here, there'd be nothing to stop her from standing in place all day. She felt herself melting into her shoes, with rigor mortis climbing up the legs. Step two was trying to move something in your head, or saying something out loud and having nothing come out. Sometimes she could only wrinkle her scalp.

Then, she heard the key turn in the door and everything, everything, thank God, was moving.

It was just Carl, but he didn't know yet that he wasn't alone. Dolly cleared her throat, but that didn't stop him. He made his way down the hallway and into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Dolly stood in place long enough to catch her breath, to slow her heart. She felt for her hair, making sure it wasn't tied up in a scarf, then she walked on stocking feet into the hallway, stopping just outside the bedroom Donna and Carl would share. She listened, but there was nothing to hear.

Was he asleep? She didn't want to scare him or scare herself, so she tiptoed back to the living room and sat—not in Carl's

chair, but in the rocker, gift of Dolly's sister-in-law, Anna—but the rocker rocked. It creaked and screeched under the sudden weight, and next minute, Carl in his underwear (shorts and tee shirt) came flying out. "What the hell," he said, "are you doing here!"

"Don't you have a bathrobe?" she asked him.

"What?" he said, but he went to the closet and pulled out a coat with a belt and hood, flung it over his shoulders and came back to glare at his mother-in-law, already trying to run his life.

"Why don't you sit down," she said. "Take a load off your feet." It was Einar's phrase, but it sounded right. "Looks nice, doesn't it?" she said, spreading her big hands to include all the rooms she'd worked in.

"Yeah," he said, standing still. Then he looked at his watch. "I was going to take a nap. Donna said you were all through in here."

"There's always more to do," she said. "You do something somewhere and there's always something else."

"I guess so," he said. Now that he'd stopped scowling, he looked young, just a big, strong boy.

"Did I wake you?"

"Nah," he said. "I had half an hour," he said again, "so I wanted to use it."

She didn't know what to say next, so she waited. "What if I make us a hot cup of tea?"

"Don't bother," he said, scratching his head.

"Sure?"

"I don't like tea anyway."

"I can see if there's coffee. I know she's got a pot because I gave it to her. And we stocked the shelves this past Saturday, so I know she's got coffee."

Dolly was up.

"Let me put on some clothes," he said. "My clothes are already moved in."

"Are they?"

"I moved myself in last night."

And wouldn't this be a tale to tell her stuck-up daughter—that she and the naked husband-to-be—in his skivvies, yes—had sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee and passing the time of day. That Dolly, her old mother, had broken in the new kitchen, turned on the gas, and opened the first bag of coffee, sharing a cup with her Carl, because that's what Einar called him: Donna's Carl. He took his coffee black, as she did. He was shy at heart, but she drew him out with questions, starting with his workday and ending with his dream of becoming a professional fireman like his Irish uncle. They had an understanding. What was it? she wondered, after he'd tied on his work boots—"So long," he said, calling her Dolly for the first time.

Did he appreciate all she'd done for them? What more could she do? In the quiet of the tenement after his departure, and before the people downstairs came home from work, Dolly considered. There was just enough here to begin: chairs and tables and baking soda and dishtowels, bed linen and electric frying pan, but the walls looked bare, even with the four pictures from the art fair: the same scene, a white cottage with trees and a stream, in fall, winter, spring, and summer. More was needed. Dolly sat back in Carl's chair to think what.

What had she and Einar had in the attic bedroom they shared, with the use of the mother-in-law kitchen and bathtub? She teared up thinking of the bridal bedspread and percale sheets she washed and ironed every week, the smoking stove in winter, and the stifling heat of summer, lying in bed under

the eaves. "And I love *you*," Einar had been taught to say to his battleaxe of a mother every night of his life, and Dolly learned to say it too, before they climbed the back stairs to their own cozy room.

"And I love you," he said to her before falling asleep every night, and Dolly found herself passing the line on to Donna. It was good for a lifetime, and all the changes that came with a life.

She meant to warn Donna not to start out with it; to enjoy what there was to enjoy after the honeymoon and before the first baby came. "And I love you," she said out loud to the cool, clean rooms.

And she sat, remembering, taking samples from the past, holding them before her eyes, comparing all that to this empty shell, waiting for its life to begin.

[2]

She was a beautiful bride, her Donna, sleek and blonde, with the smirk wiped off her face as she marched down the aisle on Einar's arm. No one knew that his poor heart was ticking so hard inside his rented tux. It ticked faster and faster, until off it went like a bomb on Easter Sunday not one year later, and Donna already with a three-month-old baby, and who was the last to know, but Dolly. She'd never forgive her for that. So much had happened and so fast, she couldn't remember what she'd forgiven, or forgotten, or refused to acknowledge.

She set the picture down on the mantel, after dusting its velvety back. A piece of the cake was wrapped in foil in the freezer. It was a bakery cake, beautiful to look at, but stale even on the day it was served. Now it would be dry as dust with its frosting like cement. Einar had cried, but that could have been the heart. She had expected to bawl like a baby, and she did, when

they repeated their vows, when they were showered with rice, when they took pictures in Donna's old bedroom, when Einar gave the toast in Swedish, and when, in her going-away suit and hat, Donna waved goodbye, then ran back, while Carl was yanking off the string of shoes, to kiss her father, giving Dolly a look that froze her to the ground, so scared and witless her baby had looked. "Don't go," she all but said.

Dolly had no make-up to wreck; her skin was her best feature, berries and cream, although a hot purple flush, now in menopause, shot from her collarbone to her temples, and might have started that very day. She hadn't expected to be so upset. It was time for the girl to go: they both knew that, yet all that night before, when Donna should have been getting her beauty sleep, the girl—never a crybaby—had wept in her mother's arms with Daddy standing in the doorway. They drank hot coffee with a shot of aquavit, they played records (folk songs, show tunes, and Einar's *Finlandia*), and looked at old pictures, and only toward morning, fell into bed for two or three hours until the hairdresser and photographer were banging on the front door. How Dolly had overslept on such a day had to be the fault of the wine at dinner, then aquavit, and the exhaustion after those weeks of preparation.

Dolly had to sit, although she had just started her Saturday cleaning. Now she had a granddaughter, but it wasn't the same. Even Einar admitted that he felt the difference that night, with their baby girl on the train to Florida. They were pooped from the wedding—and Einar silently ailing, as she was soon to find out—but they stayed up all that night, too, although without the music, the coffee, and the liquor. There was nothing to do. Even the thank-you notes were written, addressed, and stamped, ready for the post office. The gifts had been delivered to the flat and

Dolly had spent all that last day unpacking dishes and silver and blankets, vases and tea sets, the doodads and knickknacks and trying out different places for them.

She and Einar had spent that night staring into space, exhausted but awake, as she reviewed the highlights of the day. It had been perfect. Yes, it had—finally, Einar said it. "And I love you," he added, but he wasn't looking at Dolly. He was gazing out the back window at the cherry tree, planted so many summers ago to shade Donna's pool and sandbox.

[3]

And Donna and her two had only lived with them a month before Carl found his own place—the old landlord let him move back to the lumberyard—and Dolly helped resettle mother and children in the apartment she'd fixed up for the newlyweds—what, five, or was it seven years ago? It looked so different she wouldn't have recognized it. Had the kids done all this damage? They didn't leave the burn marks on the rug or crack the bathroom mirror. For a week, Dolly worked on the kitchen, but even then, the appliances didn't shine or the windows sparkle as they had the first time. The stove alone took three afternoons with the oven cleaner. Donna was too despondent to help. After three days of crying, she went to a lawyer—son of the minister who'd married them—and looked for a job. Although Dolly didn't want to hear it, Einar told her the story—there was a girlfriend, plus what they already knew: unable to keep a job after the contracting business failed, and nothing to do but deliver oil or work for the moving company. Carl was no worker, so he ended up driving an ice-cream truck, which was how he'd met the girlfriend. He wasn't a drinker, and didn't play the horses, but Donna was always crying for money and Dolly had been

shopping for both households for over a year, plus (unknown to Einar) paying the gas bill. For all that, they'd never been invited for a Sunday dinner.

So, it was a relief to have the girl—and the two little ones—under their own roof. Carl had only come once to see his family, then spent the time looking at Einar's models of early NASA spacecraft. Einar had a soft spot for Carl and always had, because he was a Swede, but with none of the solid Swedish qualities—his own mother admitted that. The generation born and raised in America was different, he'd said in defense of the Linstrom family. A day later, Dolly came back to him with the thought—not a crack—that so was he and so was she born in America, and they weren't so different from the parents who'd raised them. Einar had nothing to say to that; but he was loyal to his people, and that included a loafer like Carl. So be it, that's what she said to herself, then passed on to Donna her father's words: don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. Donna was unimpressed, but marriage and the aftermath had turned Donna, a talker, into a clam just like her father.

Little by little, Dolly—pushing sixty, but still capable—tackled four of the five rooms, scrubbed the floors, shampooed the rugs, washed windows and woodwork smeared by little hands, grouted the bathroom tile, got a plumber to fix both dripping sinks—one wrapped in a soaking dishcloth—bought fresh slipcovers and ran up some drapes on the sewing machine.

They were moving Donna in tomorrow, while Marika was at school and Kara at the babysitter's. Donna was in for a surprise. She hadn't set foot in the place since the day after Christmas, when she packed a suitcase for herself and the kids and arrived home on that frigid cold night. Even with space heaters, the old house across the street from the Bergmans' never got warm.

"What happened?" she said, seeing Donna, white as a sheet, with no stockings, just a pair of shoeboots.

A phone call, that's all the girl could get out, once in the door and one kid settled on her grandpa's lap, the other sipping his beer.

"A phone call?" Dolly kept saying, "a phone call?"

It was Einar who spelled it out to Dolly, when Donna was upstairs putting the girls to bed, saying who it must have been at the end of the line. Dolly was flabbergasted. She said to Einar, "And did you ever get phone calls like that?" She was grateful for the one-word answer she got back. That night, she whispered in his ear, "And I love you," then cried to think her Donna was stuck with such a man.

Next day, he said "She'll never be the same"; and the cruelty of it—she could still hear the harsh tone—stabbed her like a knife. Was it true?

Dolly goaded and dared herself to go into their bedroom, a room she'd avoided, although it would need an airing and maybe more. Had she the nerve? The guts? as Donna said every time she described what it took to pack a bag and call the cab on that wintry night, after Carl had left the house. After fixing up the room the first time with bedspread and curtains to suit a man's taste (royal blue with a red stripe); then, making the bed with new linens, washed and ironed, and hanging Donna's clothes and her beautiful negligee and peignoir (one of three sets, with two going on the honeymoon), Dolly had tried out the bed. It was firm, she remembered—maybe too firm? And the room smelled of camphor—or was it turps from stripping the floor? She lay there on her back, looking at the globe lamp (washed inside and out). She rolled over and opened the drawer

on his side: empty. And on hers: silk scarves, lipstick, and a jar of Vaseline. It was that same day, an hour earlier, that Carl had snuck into the place to have a nap. His side of the bed had a body-sized dent, which Dolly smoothed out after sniffing the pillow (he had peeled down the spread to drop his head on the pillowcase). She lingered there until the phone rang, and who was it but Einar telling her to come right home and fix his dinner, his stomach was growling and it was after six. But Dolly was in no hurry. It was her last chance to make sure everything was ready. She lingered, and Einar was in bed when she got home, all the lights turned out, and a soup can on the countertop, a dirty bowl and pot in the sink. She poured herself a glass of muscatel, so when Einar padded down, she hardly felt the cuff she got—so unlike Einar, but he was losing, as he said later, after she'd lashed him with words she'd heard her mother give her father, his baby girl.

What was she so afraid of? she asked herself, planted on the living room rug. She looked at her feet, egging herself on, as she had on her own wedding night, face to face with a man whose black hair gathered on his chest and pointed in a line to his belly button, and whose bare skin still had the outline of a tee shirt on his neck and arms. He had shaved a second time and splashed his jaws with cologne. Then, he'd come out of the bathroom stark naked. There was no time for her to model the silk nightie it'd taken her girlfriends all their overtime to buy. No time before the nightgown was pulled to her waist, then up over her head. He was moaning and gasping for air. It hurt, but not as bad as she thought. She watched him through it all, never closing her eyes. This was not the loving man, just a kid, who'd held her hand at the movies or given her those breathless kisses. She'd been mistaken about Einar. Einar was no boy. Her

mother had called up the hotel the next morning and insisted she come down to the desk phone. "Is everything all right?" she said. Her mother had never asked a question like that. The desk clerk and bellboy were hovering—they knew which room the newlyweds had. Dolly said yes, but knew from that moment that her mama was just another snooping woman and not the lord of creation, as her father called her. And Dolly did something that surprised her. She hung up the phone and, upon reaching her door—hers and Einar's—she took the board on a chain that said Do Not Disturb and hung it on the outside. Inside the room she and her Einar kept the curtains closed and, except for their meals and the trip to the falls, there were no other excursions, not even the carriage ride, box-lunch picnic, and dance at the palladium they'd paid for. Einar didn't always shave twice, and Dolly returned to the Bergman third floor with the flesh on her chin ground to a pulp. Dolly didn't try to hide it. Her girlfriends laughed out loud and her mother wasn't speaking to her, but Dolly had Mrs. Bergman to contend with, anyway, and it was a good thing that she and Einar were so happy with each other. That's what makes a man stick close to home, an aunt had said, when she saw the wound on Dolly's pretty face. And it was pretty, she told herself, with her hand on the doorknob, even if now, all that soft flesh had puddled into pouch and jowl. She'd never been vain, and saw her looks go, certain that they were replaced by better qualities: steadiness, common sense, and a zest for hard work.

She opened the door to a darkness, the shades and curtains drawn tight against the daylight. She switched on the light, then switched it off. The room was cold. She went back for a sweater and put on her coat, too. Then, she went back. Instead of the light, she raised the shades onto a bedlam she lacked the words

to describe. Clothes were trampled underfoot, drawers spilling out their contents. The bed was a snake of blankets and sheets. Pictures and mirrors were all tilted, and dirty glasses on the end tables. Dolly started to scoop up the clothes: bras, panties, girdles, and slips. In the closet, dresses and skirts stripped from their hangers and hooks. Not a thing of his anywhere to be seen. His dresser was empty, all the drawers shut. Dolly was too shocked to cry.

She sat down on the bed. Then, scrabbled up again, and into the kitchen, where it was clean, to make coffee, but there was no coffee. At least, it was warm, and Dolly took time to breathe before facing a task that would be interrupted time and again. It was like being underwater. Turning on the radiator, she had transformed the silence into hammerings and knockings, the familiar hissing of hot water in the pipes. She concentrated on that sound, seeing the windows fog up and frost in the time it took—from sun-blind afternoon to smoky dusk to black, starry night—to return this animal den into a place her daughter could sleep safe and sound.

Her back ached, but she no longer needed her sweater. Scrubbing the floor had coated the smell she couldn't connect to any time and place, not even the mental hospital, with the oily clean smell of Murphy's. She sniffed close to the bucket; it fortified her to tackle the job coming next: turning the mattress (just touching it!), taking down the drapes and hanging them on the line until they were stiff with cold, throwing the greasy sheets away—the top sheet looked as if it had been used to wipe the baby's bottom. Dolly bundled this stomach-turning mass for deposit in the trash.

As she toiled, she talked to herself—or to her, or to Einar. The phone rang and she let it.

It couldn't all be done in a day. For now, the room was clean enough—she'd boiled bucket after bucket of water to scald the windows, walls, bedframe, floor, closet. Paper was removed from the dresser drawers. Dolly had tied up bundles of Donna's clothes by color and fabric, and what needed dry cleaning or just an airing.

She had been too preoccupied, hearing his voice ("Ma?"), to ask herself the question: how did he get in, because she hadn't heard his steps. She was winding the hose around the vacuum cleaner. The shock would have laid her flat on her back if he hadn't grabbed her in time. Once steady, she pushed the vacuum canister toward the closet with her foot, but the threshold stopped it. Then, he reached down and lifted it up on its wheels.

"I saw lights," he said.

"I don't want to speak to you, Carl," she said, finding the words when she needed them.

She went into the kitchen for her things. He stood in the doorway. "Get out of my way now," she said, not thinking to be nervous until she was on the street again and looked up at the windows to see him blocking the light.

[4]

BUT THAT WAS ANCIENT HISTORY, a rock better left unturned, as she learned when the need came to tell someone about that night, and no one but Donna who cared enough to listen, and she cared *too* much. "So, don't go sticking your nose where it doesn't belong," she said to her mother, when Dolly asked the simple question of how her Bill and the girls were going to get along. "Fine," Donna said, but Dolly wasn't convinced by the harsh tone anymore than by the looks and one-word answers

she got when she asked Marika and Kara, now teenagers. Her Donna had grown hard. Instead of filling out after marriage and children, as most women do, Donna was a constant dieter, who'd rather starve and chain-smoke than put on a pound or two of comfortable weight, the kind that settled a woman down. Still attractive—maybe more so—Donna was thinner than her daughters and they wore each other's clothes—some of the clothes, the tube tops and halters, too young for a middle-aged woman, but Donna didn't believe in acting her age. Otherwise, she wouldn't consider marrying someone eight years younger. Her Bill McLaughlin was okay—there was nothing wrong with him, except for being an ex-priest, when—for them—that was a fate worse than death. Donna had told her mother that it all but cancelled out the value of a whole life. There was no sure way to redeem it, so these ordained men (there were a few of them around, all the same age), who left the priesthood, ended up believing in nothing. This one would have been just as glad to spend the nights at Donna's with no marriage at all, but Donna had put her foot down, and Dolly was glad to see her do it. It was a first.

Their wedding was a week from Friday, and Dolly was still getting things ready. The reception would be in her own backyard, and Einar would have been proud that his fruit trees—an orchard really—were fully grown and productive. The cherry blossoms were gone, but the apples were blooming like brides in their pink and white. Dolly had made the napery for the tables. She was fixing finger sandwiches and cold salads. There'd be iced tea and May wine with strawberries. A Bergman cousin, up from Florida, was giving Donna away, and the daughters were her bridesmaids. The paper was running a nicely written item with no mention of a prior marriage or divorce, just the use, one

time, of the word Mrs. Dolly was happy enough to burst, but that word reminded her of how Einar had left them not so many years ago over breakfast on a Sunday morning. No complaint, not a peep, but Dolly felt she heard something burst, before he slumped over on the chair, then toppled off it. And yes, the tea kettle was also boiling, hissing, rocking on the stove, and she was up from the table at the moment she lost Einar. She had poured his tea before setting the kettle down, then he fell at her feet, like a house collapsing.

Her eyes filled with tears, but no time for that, when she needed to plant annuals around the house and stew the chickens for salad. Donna was out buying dresses for the girls. They were still all living in that third-floor apartment, although the older one, Marika, often stayed with her grandmother, sleeping on a daybed in the sewing room. Marika looked like her father but took after Dolly, while Kara, who looked like Einar's side of the family, hated school and stayed back in eighth grade, just like Carl. He had remarried and offered to take Kara off her mother's hands, but the girls were going nowhere, even though Carl, who was back in contracting, had room for them in the rancher in Warwick, with three bedrooms empty, as his schoolteacher wife had no kids of her own. They'd had a small wedding (she was Catholic, like Bill) a few years back, and the notice included a picture of a round face, pug nose, and a toothy smile. Dolly was surprised that Carl could end up with a college-educated person, then she remembered that Donna's Bill, a priest, had gone beyond college. It was an odd world nowadays, and it was getting odder as children married outside of their faith, let alone not their own people. Sometimes she was glad Einar was gone. He wouldn't like any of it.

And now, with the chickens cooling to be wrapped and fro-

zen, her pansies and petunias planted, and the house clean—it was Saturday—next week was slated for a deep cleaning of the downstairs, because people would be in and out to use the bathroom—she was itching to get over to Donna's place to see what had happened there. Bill bought a new bedroom set (mahogany; everything with Carl had been maple), and Dolly had given the new couple a pair of lounge chairs. Bill didn't have much to move in: a hifi all in separate pieces, unlike the one Einar had built into a cabinet, and his clothes. (He'd sold his chalice to pay for the honeymoon trip to Nova Scotia; they were driving.)

The furniture had been delivered yesterday, Donna and Bill were at work, and Marika and Kara at school, so Dolly packed the car with some essentials (a good wax, an old sheet, Mr. Clean).

She had her own key. Donna had changed the old-fashioned lock, installing a deadbolt. Inside, with the door closed, but not bolted, Dolly stopped to take it all in. The new chairs, arranged at angles in each corner of the living room were still in their plastic, one blue, one beige. There was still nothing on the walls but the old pictures of the four seasons. A glass shelf had been tacked over the TV to hold the girls' trophies: ice hockey and swimming. Another shelf held the crystal animals Donna collected. The girls kept their rooms locked. Dolly had heard about that. The same locksmith came out on a call that was not, in fact, from Mrs. Linstrom, although Mrs. Linstrom was stuck, when the work was done, paying the bill. That was the kind of trick Kara was capable of, but Marika must have been in on it because her room got a lock too. Donna had given them each a bedroom, sleeping on the fold-out couch herself, but now, with a new husband coming in, Kara's bed had been moved to Mari-

ka's room, and all new furniture bought. Dolly hadn't seen the bedroom yet, but Donna seemed contented, even pleased with the results.

Dolly opened the bedroom door. She looked at everything. No words could do justice to the swirl of pale color, the gleaming white, soft rose, and lavender, the sheers billowing at the windows. It was a girl's dream bedroom with just a stroke of masculinity in the uprights of the dark, wooden bed. The windows looked out on nothing but the tops of the trees. There were no shades or blinds.

Dolly wiped her hands on her slacks before touching the bed. The spread was a cotton print, a quilt really. Matching valences were hung over the windows. Under the quilt, a soft, white blanket and—not ironed, but smooth—clean sheets. Throw rugs of a thick, almost furry nap—not practical, in fact, slippery on the wood floor—lay at the foot and sides of the bed. Donna had hung a crystal animal—a turtle—on a string to catch the sunlight and spangle it on the walls. In the place of the old light fixture, a paper lantern. "Perfect," Dolly said out loud.

The rocker was in the corner, white-washed with fresh, blue cushions. Dolly opened the closet door. Well, that was more like Donna; everything—dresses, pants, bathrobes—all mixed together and shoes flung and piled up on the floor. But, where would he put his clothes? Was Donna going to give him any room?

Dolly spun around twice with her arms flung out. That's how this room made you feel. She laughed out loud when she stopped herself, and swayed, feeling the room go black, then bright again.

[5]

She was hobbling around one day in her efficiency at Ocean State Nursing. The bathroom was too small for the walker, so she kept a cane just inside the door. "Happy New Year," she said to herself, because it was almost New Year. Donna and Kara had been by to visit, bringing a tuna-egg casserole, a chocolate éclair, and a six-pack of fruit wine with screw caps because Dolly was not about to pop any corks and break a window. Kara, who'd finished beauty school and now had her own shop just over the city line, had washed, cut, and set her grandmother's silky gray hair. Dolly was still wearing the dryer cap, but she'd unhooked herself from the hose. Her scalp was itchy and the curlers were coming out, ready or not. Hanging onto the sink with one hand, Dolly wrestled off the cap and pulled out the rollers one by one, trying to catch them in the basin, not on the floor, where she couldn't reach. She didn't see her granddaughters that often. Marika had moved out of state to take a nursing job, where the pay was better and more single men. Donna she saw every day. She brought supper over and stayed to play a game of cards or Parcheesi. Donna and Bill had taken over the old house when Dolly decided it was time. Donna was still fighting her about why she couldn't occupy a bedroom, when there were three. They were willing to build a second bathroom up there, just for her, but her no was final: it was time for her to live somewhere else, some place smaller and safer, closer to help when she needed it, and—at her age—what did she expect to do but sew, read, and watch TV, and all that could be done here. This place was no smaller, and that was a fact, than the attic bedroom she and Einar had shared until the baby was born. Donna didn't like it, and she never would. It was unnecessary, it was an

insult. Dolly said that she didn't want to be in the way. Plus, she liked her independence. She still had a car and drove when she needed something and didn't want to bother Donna, busy with her job and planning Kara's wedding. Dolly was diabetic and the loss of toes on both feet had left her unsteady. Sometimes even the walker didn't feel quite enough, but Dolly said nothing. She didn't want any restrictions she hadn't set for herself, as needed, and who knew better than she what she needed.

When all the rollers were in the sink, she shook her head hard and used the free hand to rub it and scratch. Her skin had always been sensitive. If she but looked at a patch of poison ivy, she got it; she cut out every tag on her blouses. Looking in the mirror, her hair looked like a nest, all those stiff rolls going this way and that. The face underneath was a pudding with eyes like a frog's behind their thick lenses. The blue was turning white and that's why her vision wasn't what it used to be. She'd never needed glasses and was always the one to find things lost in the sand. She was squinting and didn't know why. Now her eyes were wide open, but that didn't help her see any better. She needed new glasses, or were these just smudged? With her free hand, she unhooked the plastic frames one ear at a time, held the glasses up to the light, ran them under water, rubbing a bit of soap on each side, rinsing. Now she had to sit down to dry them.

Hobbling out, she remembered what she'd nearly forgotten. She'd asked the druggist to make up a remedy nobody used any more, but it helped when she had trouble sleeping—not falling asleep, which she did in the chair—but staying asleep. It was prescribed by Dr. Motta, who died a few years ago, but the prescription was still good. It was a mixture, because she had trouble swallowing pills, of codeine and menthol and simple

syrup. She usually kept two bottles in the fridge, but the last one was nearly empty and the drugstore would be closed tomorrow for New Year's, and on Sunday and Monday.

There was enough light in the sky to make it there and back before dark. All her prescriptions were at the old drugstore on the avenue, ten minutes walk from the old house. She wasn't going to bother Donna, or ask if she could go on her own. Donna insisted on knowing whenever she took the car from its numbered spot in the parking lot.

Dolly was a good driver, as the driving foot had lost only one toe and still had some sensation. The other foot had none and was useless.

It had been a dark, bitter cold day but driving toward the city, the sun spread like butter on the horizon.

She missed the old neighborhood every day of her life, so she decided to drive near (not on) her old street, around the block, and in and out of those narrow streets. She hardly got back here on her own because Donna insisted on running all the errands herself and brought the food to her. There was so much to remember, and time flew.

She was a block away from the avenue where all the stores were: the liquor store, Riordan's, the old A&P, Metropolitan Insurance, Citizen's Bank and Paul's Toggery, Benny's, Walcott's and Butterfield's. But it wasn't Butterfield's; CVS had built a new store where the old one had been. There was a parking lot on the side and she aimed for it, but the light was turning yellow, and now red. A minute later, when it turned green, she glanced up at Dr. Fico's old office to see if it still had the sign. No, it didn't. She had to put her foot on the brake, because the light had changed back to yellow, but instead of the brake, her boot pushed down the other pedal and she watched as, slowly, but

really very fast, the car leapt over the curb and plowed through the plate-glass window as if it were paper. She saw it all happening—she had her glasses on, and even had time to wonder, before blanking out: would the car stop?

DONNA NOW LIVED IN THE HOSPITAL, if by living you mean—as Dolly did—being there day and night, taking her meals there, while Dolly was hooked up to food, water, air, and electricity. She was diapered and had a special tube running out for number one. Beeping next to her bed was a machine telling the doctor how hard and how often her heart was beating and how much air her one lung was taking in. Donna ate supper with her mother (who was getting sugar water and other essentials in her veins). She read her the paper and sponged her cheeks and neck from a basin of ice water. Dolly's head was bandaged, and she couldn't talk because of the tube down her throat, but Donna seemed to know what she wanted to say, and said it for her, out loud, no matter who else was in there. She wasn't embarrassed. The minute Dolly woke up from her heavy sleep, her eyes would find her daughter's eyes and they looked at each other, imitating the one making a face.

When Dolly's time came, Donna had to be sedated because her crying had caused a bout of hiccups that wouldn't stop, and a nose bleed.

And now, with her second husband and her first husband, along with her first husband's second wife; with Kara and her fiancé, and Marika and her partner—a woman, something Dolly never knew—Donna, not young but still slim and blonde, stood by her mother's grave, a dusty looking hole even in the dead of winter. Her mother's casket, to be lowered next to Einar's, was white. Donna had picked it out, once she'd gotten over

the shock of discovering that her mother had everything paid for. Dolly hadn't picked out her own casket, but had set aside enough for any model the undertaker had in the showroom fifteen years ago. In addition to all the funeral parlor fees, there was money for a service at St. Lucy's, with something for the minister, money for the paid death notice, and for engraving the Bergman stone with the new name and dates. But why did she ever think one hundred and fifty dollars was going to be enough to carve all the new information? It was Dolly's only slip-up. Then Donna saw that the stone already had her mother's name on it, with her birthday and a dash. When Donna laid eyes on that finishing touch, just as they were pulling the body out from the hearse, the saddest moment of all, she started to laugh and no one could stop her.

The Sweetness of Her Name

They moved into Silver Glade with a brand new baby, unnamed, although the grandparents had it registered for high school as Clementine Wrentham Farmer. Wrentham was their name and Farmer was the name their daughter, Lina, used when writing the check for the house. Her professional name, to their joy, was still Lina Rose Wrentham. The baby had been born in a water bath at Doctors' Hospital on the day projected for its birth. Lina had not been anxious or eager, just ready, with the papers signed on the house and the nursery fully equipped. She was almost forty and this was her first, but the baby girl was perfect and slicked out of its mother like a flying fish. The father, an actor, was just back from making commercials. With what Buddy made in one exhausting month on the coast, the couple lived on for a year, after Lina's money had been used to buy the house outright.

Their Lina was a painter of landscapes, lush, atmospheric thickets with an animal hidden in the green or gray abundance. Their daughter—and their only child—had been born as perfect as Clementine with a peachy skin and glass-green eyes. But Lina had been a difficult child, near-mute and disinterested

in family or playmates, but not so much as to delay her steady progress through school. Although attractive and slender, Lina hadn't many boyfriends, even in art school, when she'd moved to New York at a time when the city was filled with young people, on their own for the first time. Lina's drawings and etchings of Richard (Buddy) Farmer (who had, they admitted, a wonderfully alive body—to judge from the artwork—with graceful limbs and torso of an antique god) were hung in the school's gallery, the originals sold in auction and widely imitated—her earliest and strongest success. Lina had fallen deeply in love and, with the mind of a child, unripened, impulsive, and inexperienced, attached herself to someone she'd seen twice a week for an hour or two, not a bad man (this they acknowledged), but as immature as their daughter, and conceited, selfish, and headstrong.

Buddy had gone to Hollywood, landing a part in an afternoon serial. He married twice and had two teenaged girls living with their mothers on the coast. Lina had dropped out of art school and holed up in her Village apartment, living on the money her grandmother had left her. For a time, she'd been connected to an experimental theater where she'd designed sets and learned the art of stage managing. Her parents had seen two such productions, beautifully staged but nonsensical, by their lights, and pretentious, and neither was noticed for anything but a brief run and handsome properties. From this, their Lina got other jobs at more conventional theaters and in one, ran into Buddy, who'd retired from the soaps and left Hollywood to refresh himself by a foray in the legitimate theater, something he'd trained for. He had the looks and screen name that could launch the off-Broadway remake he'd signed on to and separate it from other obscurities running at the Public and Circle in the Square.

Buddy wanted to call his child and third daughter Frances—Fanny—after his grandmother, who'd also been a painter's model. He planned to raise this child and live with it as he hadn't with Tony and Andy, now thirteen and eleven. This was Lina's one and only, as Tony was Eve's and Andy, Margot's. The baby was just a month old, a good sleeper, and even a trifle lifeless when awake. Its eyes had a thicker blue glaze than most newborns and its other features seemed lightly drawn on, and so pale as to fade in the pink, palm-sized sphere. Buddy wanted to be alone with his new wife and baby girl, but Lina's parents were settled into the Silver Glade cottage for another week.

Buddy liked Al Wrentham, a retired lawyer, who was putting their garden in and had brought tools and boxes of plants from his own beds. Mrs. Wrentham spent her days sitting with Lina and the infant, or the infant and its day nurse, while Lina took her two- and sometimes three-hour naps. Lina was finding time to sleep longer in the morning, but still claimed the middle of a long summer day for a nap with shades drawn and quilt pulled up to her chin. These three-hour disappearances gave them all a sense, however fleeting and unwelcome, of a permanent loss. But, by dinnertime, after Dad had mixed cocktails or opened another bottle from the case of champagne saved for just this event, and the sun was setting and penciling through the woods its warm, late rays, all felt well within the two sets of families, now under the same roof.

Buddy heard the name Clementine on a Saturday during one of Lina's slumbers, when Grandmother and infant were alone together in the nursery. He was padding down the hallway, carrying a trayful of color transparencies sent by his agency. His gift as an actor who could sell anything to any sector gave him a say in pitches for new accounts, and his tray included

shots of allergy medicines, Swedish furniture, German cars, fur coats, and French vermouth.

"Clementine," he heard, and at first thought his mother-in-law was singing to the baby. He stopped outside the door, and she *was* singing, but it was "Rockabye baby in the treetop," so Buddy kept moving. Then he heard it again, when the song was over. The door was partly open, so he entered, placing the tray on the baby's dresser, a fine cherry highboy, one of the best pieces in the house.

Mrs. Wrentham placed her finger on her lips: baby was finally under, but Daddy was giving her such a hard look that Grandma Jane's eyes filled with tears. She wrapped Buddy's baby girl in the fleece and lay her on her belly in the crib, a wicker crib of Lina Rose's. By the time she had the baby settled and had patted it on its tiny back to make sure its lungs were filling with air, Buddy understood that his mother-in-law had named his child with this absurdly old-fashioned, hayseedy name, more fitting for a cow or a hen than for the girl who in his heart had always been Fanny. He looked into the crib at the back of the baby's head with its black, feathery hair and froglike neck.

What about Frances Clementine? Dad predictably offered later that day over the cocktail shaker. Lina was half-asleep on her rocker, with the baby's head lopped onto her shoulder. Her husband, Buddy, was playing the piano—one showtune sliding into another, and now some sour-sounding Kurt Weill. Lina didn't care for either name, and both certainly was no improvement.

"Why not?" her mother wanted to know.

"Now, now," Dad said, handing mother the first shaken drink, "no need to decide tonight." Then, he recognized the new tune, one he loved, as "Fanny," and in that romantic, French light, the

name made sense, especially for someone in the theater. Dad sang a line of it, recalling only the one word, "Fanny."

"Oh my darlin', oh my darlin'" came the next tune, and Buddy was thumping it out and swaying side to side. Lina stood up and carried the baby out of the room. "Where are you going?" her father asked.

Lina carried the baby girl not to the nursery but to their bedroom. The baby weighed no more than a loaf of bread, especially with the weight of its head like a croquet ball, borne on the shoulder. Its little body was limp but it could come alive in an instant with its spastic motion and tense arms and legs. Sleeping, it was still fetal. Lina was starting to call her baby—if it were hers to name—Elizabeth. That was her favorite doll's name, and there she was, lying in the middle of the double bed in fur-trimmed velvet coat and high-heels. Lina lay the baby next to the antique doll, but that wasn't right. Both suffered by comparison. She moved the doll to the window seat with the rest of the dolls from twelve years of birthdays and Christmas—each with a different girl's name—and lay the baby on the bed where the doll had been.

The baby stiffened suddenly and a wave of red ran up its arms and over its neck. Was it dreaming? What would its dreams be about? Perhaps, some of Lina Rose's dreams had passed through the cord, or silted into the baby's water. During her pregnancy, Lina Rose had had dozens of water dreams: plates of water and still, sun-soaked tidal pools; shady streams with water snakes and the delicate prints of mayflies. Her dreams were always of a primeval landscape with no picnickers or lawnmowers. They were soundless.

She'd like to find out who the baby was before stamping it

with a girl's name, especially ones so resonant as Fanny Frances, Clementine, or even regal Elizabeth. Her own name had softened her edges, and prettified her impulses, once these impulses worked their way to the surface, where they could be seen. By that time, she was mature enough to curb them, or shape them, no matter how strong. And they were seen, in any case, through the soft-focus of that pretty girl's name. How tempted she'd been to crayon on these dolls' waxy faces, to pull out their glassy eyes, or bite into the rubbery baby doll's head. Pulling their limbs from the sockets to smell the powdery perfume of the moist rubber, cut their hair to the skull, exchange head for head, or bathe the cloth dolls with clothes sewn to their rag bodies in a strong suds of Tide or Borax. She had an impulse to stymie the sweetness of her name, but when the impulse had circled through her body—as she had seen the red flush through the baby's body—it had died down before words could reach her head. What came out was nothing. By the time she'd found her way with paintbrush and oils, the "Lina Rose" had coiled around the impulses, and the paintings were vaguer than they might be with the same glaucous scrim that covered the infant's eyes. The animal in the paintings always had its back to the viewer. Before that, with a pencil, she'd drawn with a witless fidelity the male model who'd knifed into her mind (and aimless life) like a thief.

Lina had locked the bedroom door and sure enough, here was someone testing the knob. "Lina?" she heard her father say in that disappointed voice. "Come out of there," his voice now flooded with false cheer, "it's your baby to name whatever you like."

"Katherine with a K," she said. And that day the baby smiled for the first time.

THE PARENTS WOULD GO AWAY but everything in the new house spoke of their presence, and interference. The beautiful pieces of furniture—highboy, dining room table and chairs, the china closet full of blue, black, and red Wedgwood, the baby's antique toys (blocks, puppet theater, tea set, music box), the lingering presence of the discarded names, Clementine and Frances, although Frances could still be tacked onto Katherine and from that "scramble," as Buddy saw it, Fanny could still emerge as the baby heard the name on her father's lips when Lina was sleeping or painting in her studio. Baby was still registered at the Appleton Academy—where her tuition had been paid many times over by the gift of the Carolina Clementine Wrentham Memorial—as Clementine. Great-Grandmother Lina pronounced her name L-eye-na, although Lina, her granddaughter, had modified her own name to Leena, for reasons no one in the family had ever understood.

When had Lina become Leena? She had been a mouse-like child. Jane was brooding on this question as she unloaded the dishwasher and rearranged the kitchen shelves, putting stemware with stemware and tumblers with tumblers, dismantling the insane system her daughter (it had to be hers) had created, as if no one on earth had solved this elementary household problem. Lina's system was to pair things: all possible glasses, plates, and bowls to make place settings of two. So much space was wasted and the look through the glass doors was unsettling, worse than sloppy. Once Jane had gotten started, she tore out the shelf paper and laid in the embroidered tea towels she found still boxed in the pantry. She arranged the cloth so the monogram hung over the edge. She had polished each glass and clustered them

tightly, after cleaning the glass doors. It was distracting labor and the mouse was still standing lifelessly in her mind like a cartoon before the animation starts. Had it started? This question set her to unfolding tea napkins and placing them between the plates of Lina's grandmother's china, now that these plates—separated to make a set of utilitarian doubles—were recollected in sculptural stacks of like with like, for the sake of their beauty.

Animation for Lina was impulse upon impulse with deadness in between. A mouse to a mechanical toy and back again. How would she keep this twice-married actor, with an eye that roved even to skim the outline of his mother-in-law's compact form?

She'd given him a baby but these days a baby was no check to the extent or duration of the roving. After all, he'd left the mothers of his other two babies, and the children adored him, as Lina said, and Jane could see it herself at their wedding, when both wanted to be bridesmaids and hung on their father, rubbing their cheeks on his shoulders, holding his hands, or drinking from his wine glass.

Had she gone too far? she wondered, staring at the sparkling glass and the still life of ivory plates and bowls. She was scooping up the debris of yellowed shelf paper when Albert came up from behind and cleared his throat. He'd come up from the basement carrying their empty suitcases. He had written a large check and presented it to Buddy and now it was time for them to go.

Buddy had taken the check without looking at it, and they shook hands. "This is her first grandchild," Albert said to his son-in-law, but Buddy reassured him that no apologies were necessary: they were grateful, he and Lina, for their help and their company. Albert could see behind the simplicity of this statement, and its uninflected delivery, the actor's skill, but how different was that from the polish of good manners that

smoothed even the most intimate family relation? Buddy was a good husband for his daughter, regardless of how the marriage had come about. Buddy was the kind of man who had already forgiven (or forgotten) the fact that Lina had made him a father before he was a husband. Time, and the beautiful baby Katherine, would do the rest. Buddy had never had a home of his own and this clapboard house was solid in its frame and foundation with thick plaster walls and a dry basement.

Jane's face flushed and the paper crackled in her hands, but it was never worth fighting this man, who asserted himself so rarely. She didn't care to hear his thoughts, though, and crushed the paper into a ball, pushing past him and out the door. She'd burn this paper in the outdoor fireplace. That way, she'd leave behind something finished that could not be undone. Her own marriage was lived out that way, with no day's leavings (not so much as a dirty cup in the sink or discarded clothing on the chair) to disfigure the morning cleanliness of their home.

And would they have to change the name on Katherine's school registration? Jane wondered, back in her own house. But Albert had already seen to that, and best to let his wife gradually accustom herself to the change. But the school wrote within the week (the planned-giving office) to inform the Wrenthams that the change had been made and the five-week-old baby was entered in first grade as Katherine F.C. Farmer.

That afternoon, right after the mail came, Jane called the family lawyers and disposed of her assets in a different manner, cutting out her husband's nieces and nephews and giving Albert himself, should he outlive her, a yearly allowance and no estate

rights. But while the partner was penning in the changes for a formal redraft, Jane burst into tears, telling him to please restore the documents to their original state. Katherine F.C. Farmer (or Carolina, as she'd be called) was her only grandchild and Albert, the man she'd invested a lifetime in, almost killing her mother in the choice and her stubborn adherence to it. Jane would not make the same mistakes her mother had made, some of which had caused Jane's darling father to stray from the family and then drink too much and, when all had been taken from him, to tie himself to a beam in the stable and rock there until Brother found him and broke his own arm trying to cut him down with a boy-scout knife. Father and son had fallen in a bundle from the rafters, Brother falling onto Dad was what had saved his life.

Albert knew it would work out, as things always did (in his mind), and he was able to reassure his daughter, before leaving Silver Glade that day, when poor Lina had seen what her mother had done to her new kitchen. Baby Katherine had been Katherine with a K for one day when the reorganization of the kitchen shelves caused her mother, Lina, to say the things she'd said (hurtful and intemperate) to her mother—a story the baby girl would hear again and again, as she grew up, with the emphasis flickering like light bulbs on a scoreboard. To reassure her of what? That for all the harm the grandmother had done, that the baby was free now to be named by her mother—or her father, he added, but Albert knew that Lina would settle the matter for herself, as she always had.

So how did the baby lose the name Katherine, given to her by her mother, to become her great-grandmother's namesake?

The grandparental visit ended abruptly, punctuated by the vicious tongue-lashing Lina Rose gave her mother over the trivial issue of some re-arranged cabinets. Buddy, with the check in his pocket, took Dad's side, the side of reason and peace at any cost. He wrapped his wife in the arms she had so miraculously captured on the page, and walked her to the kitchen door, pressing against her lower back the link between them, the cord that had connected them to make the baby Katherine, Carolina, Clementine, or Fanny. He walked her as a father walks his daughter in a dance where her feet rest on his and are guided by his dance rhythm and grace. He put his actor's lips near her right ear and whispered the syllables of her name, reminding her by the singular tone that the kitchen was part of what was just a house, the whole worth of which was grounded in his love for her and theirs for that sleeping baby, whatever name it happened to acquire through no wish or fault of its own. Buried in Lina Rose, far from the tumult of words and noxious deeds, was the animal with its back turned. Lina Rose saw all its varieties at once, from the monkey to the tree frog to the unctuous jungle snake, the uncaved bear, linx, and northern wolf, clothed in their verdant tangle. A breeze rippled through her body, not yet healed from the ejection of the new and perfect body it had created in all those awkward days and nights. Her inner leaves were wilted from that heat of birth. He whispered more words, but she was immune to their sense, as she had been as a child and her head was no different from a doll's head.

But the whispering cooled the flesh of her cheek and the bundled rose of her ear. The lights on the animals in their profound lair went out, and, by then, the grandmother and grandfather were in the guest room packing.

The baby's name will always be Katherine. You can read it on her diploma, her appointment to the Connecticut bar, her pilot's license, and her death certificate (for she never married), but she was called by the name Carolina, for her mother.

The Tree of Life

He was saving his suit for just this day. He'd bought it from a men's tailor shop, now out of business. Gray and lightweight, with pockets still sewn down, it fitted his long limbs as if made yesterday to measure. No American suits were constructed in this material anymore, as few desired such a sheen even in a summer suit.

His other suits were navy and charcoal, tweed and pinstriped, and one seersucker from younger days. He had his dress uniforms and home clothes of a sober pattern, as he was otherwise no bird of paradise. His wife was. She was dressy and liked to wear bright, solid colors of a close, body-sculpting cut. She wore high heels even at home, although to his mind, her legs were not her strong point. He had chosen this woman (or been chosen) from the base typing pool invited several times a year to the officers' club. She liked to drink and dance but was starchy and even aloof as a check to his being for her family a "catch." Lila was enough of a flirt to catch his eye, when he hadn't planned on marrying until the old folks were gone, or needed his support less. He was the oldest of seven, and his father would accept "handouts" from none but him. Sometimes he cried to

take them—the checks and bills and paper bonds and postal orders—but he took them and it tided them over now that the railroad had given up the western town his family had settled a hundred years earlier, when there was nothing at all out there but fool's gold. Lila took on the old folks, too, as she took on his every duty, but his Dad, Rolla, took no more handouts after Cato was married and had his own family to support.

Lila was Irish, from the coastal town where his carrier had for so many months lay in dry dock. Her people were immigrants like his, but they'd kept their old ways and ties to the old country as his family had dropped theirs when they altered their names to homestead. The west was too big and lonesome for people not to need their neighbors, and more often than not, the neighbors spoke a different language—but not for long. In Natick, his wife's town, people still knew each other by parish church and the religious order staffing the parochial school. To Lila's connections (the few that were left), the Battle of the Boyne was still a live and bitter hurt.

After the war, Cato and Lila settled in rural New York, up near Canada. There they had their four children, all boys, one pair favoring his, one her side of the family. The two youngest had pale, Irish mugs with reddish hair, while the two elder were severe looking, with pioneer faces and large, moon-like eyes. They were smart and able children, but the pioneers were mechanically gifted—a nuclear scientist and digital engineer—while the Micks, like their mother, were chatty and good with people—one was a social worker and the other in the movie business.

Fifty years old, the gray suit was like new, although dust had collected in the seams, a fine, golden sawdust that fanned into

the air as the pieces were shaken out. The tailor had left chalk marks on the inside of the waistband. Cato was a chemist and had the habit of splitting out all the elements from any compound. It simplified life and made sense out of the time-line from Rolla's working life to Cato's, and from Cato's to his eldest son, Nick's, whose job was embedding a factory's worth of time and motion onto a disk smaller than a coin, the end-stage in the alchemy of matter into an alternating pair of numbers, the pipe dream of every high school math whiz born between the wars. Rolla had been a railroad machinist and his father, a farmer on the newly settled land. Cato remembered Rolla's Dad and could still see him strapping on his wooden leg as he rotated out of Rolla's Model A; the memory, compact as an old photo, was in black and white: white shirt, black boots, black cigar, no teeth. On the edge of the frame, and almost out of the picture, was Rolla in his leather apron; he'd owned no Sunday clothes and was buried in a sack suit of his grandson's, sent home when Rolla was in his last illness and so wasted that the summer suit in a boy's size fell on him like a blanket. The four boys were their grandfather's pallbearers. When Cato had resettled his mother and put the house on the market, the Munk family pushed further west for a week of fishing and hiking. Their western holiday was a success and repeated annually even after the last family member was gone from Goldenseed.

His father had been "Rolla" to him and his brothers from age sixteen, but to his four boys, he would always be Dad. The Irish boys, one a foot taller than Cato, teased and kidded their Pops, while the "true" Munks assigned to him a humorless authority that surprised him when it was relayed back through Lila. They were all Catholics, and Cato a convert from the day of his marriage. Yet the true Munks were more devout (one a lay religious

in Opus Dei, the other a church deacon) than their Irish brothers, one of whom had divorced his first wife and was separated from his second.

The "boys," as Lila still called them, now lived at the four corners of the continent, but came home several times a year, rarely together. Their lives were somewhat hidden from Cato and Lila, in a way that nothing could be hidden from Goldenseed or Natick, Mass. When parents born before the century's end asked their children a question, they got an answer. That generation felt they had a right to know, but also to hear what they wanted to hear. What they *didn't* want to hear was a measure of what room there was for further improvement in marital and family life. Cato's generation asked of their grown-up children only what they were invited to ask.

But as years passed in their now-distant lives, and as the answers got repetitive and even rote, Cato wanted to know more. To be curious without a clear objective was a novelty to him. His course early on was set by a painstaking measure of what was on the surface; through such a rule, he'd made his living and, before then, kept his men and ship advancing in the treacherous waters of the South Pacific. Analysis yielded a set of terms and their conversion values. By these values, one set of terms could be turned into another. Chemical analysis encompassed one such set and was convertible to the system the true Munks used to apply the not-always-clear dictates and parables of Jesus Christ to politics, morals, and communal life as they found them in South Florida and Eugene, Oregon, where the soldier of Christ and the deacon resided, respectively, with their families. The elder Munks didn't appear to wonder about anything beyond what their church had firmly settled. In that way they resembled their grandfather. To Rolla, a man's life was short and

hard, and a productive run demanded vigilance, with no time left over for fancies.

Nonetheless, Cato's life seemed to be fitted with the extra pocket, which even his easy-going Mick children, and their mother, seemed to lack, although they wouldn't have missed it. Cato had kept this curiosity hidden, even after he left Goldenseed and after resigning his commission, and on weekends in the snowbound wilds of rural New York, and on the treks west with his family, when no one was keeping track of his hours. It was easy to hide it with Lila and the children, who filled their down time with conversational duets and quartets, airing their interests and the clashes within them, with their mother serving as soloist, and sometimes as referee. For each day of her life, Lila was prepared with a docket of debatable points gleaned from the household, letters from Natick and tidbits from the local newspaper. She held her listeners' attention with a penetrating voice and a battery of showy gestures. Compared to Lila's hornet-like insistence, the children were harmless natterers. The younger ones were jokers and sports fans, locked in close competition for girls, home runs, and zingers. The elder two built models of warplanes, collected minerals (and later LPs): they specialized early and their interests interlocked; from Nick's organic gardening to Jerry's vegetarianism, from Jerry's passion for church history to Nick's classes in French medieval art. Their wives and girlfriends were folk dancers and quilters, knitters and weavers, wholesome girls, plain and soft-spoken.

Lila was voluble in the pleasure taken in the outcome of the Munk-Callahan clan, but this was nothing new: she'd also been satisfied at each step along the way, from meeting and marrying an officer, to making him a home in the country and raising four boys. Of all people and things, Cato had most curiosity about

this woman, but nothing could be learned about Lila that she didn't want you to know. The hard rind of talk was renewed every day with familiar themes. Her habits were steady and resistant to penetration. She seemed to have a built-in wariness and left no trace of the half-hearted or half-finished. She called it "keeping busy," her formula for putting people off the scent. The house was bright and tidy, spotless even with four battling boys; the bed seemed made even when the married pair were in it; the coverlet smoothly unfolded and the ironed sheets cool to the touch. She talked until he fell asleep, and sometimes longer. If he woke up, she was usually awake. She seemed to need only a few hours of sleep, and some of it snatched when the boys were napping, or during the late show.

Because his curiosity had, in his wife, no unguarded surface to explore, and his boys were assignable (even in their own eyes) to qualities and habits stamped on them by family, the wonder had to spread and attach itself to other forms of warm humanity. He had taken up golf, but there was nothing to fix upon there, so the clubs were given away before he even mastered the rules of the game. Recently, after other less-than-satisfying trials, he'd enrolled in the university extension to take an art class, and then joined an art club. He was taking his second class in life drawing, after he'd tried drafting, water-color landscape, and collage. In life drawing, the models, various shaped, naked men and women, offered to the art students (or at least to him) new and limitless ways of looking at the body. They were not glamorous pin-ups—most were too heavy and homely. They were not there for the purpose of scientific or medical abstraction. What truths they offered were hard to classify, which is why Cato liked working on them. At first, he was shy of the naked expanse of flesh, rough and smooth: the legs and buttocks, the backs and ankles

and necks. And they were told not to focus on details, but to capture in a few deliberate strokes the weights and stresses, the spinal-muscular tensions, the drape of flesh over the symmetry of bone.

His own body seemed to have a history of usefulness, while still *terra incognita*. His feet were now the shape of his shoes. His wrist was banded by the pressure of his watch. His upper joints were worn by the demands of precision instruments: calipers and retorts, the miles of glass and rubber tubing. His face seemed to him a kind of dial. But these people, paid by the hour to stand or sit or lean against a piling, excited the air around them without any instrumentality; even the purposive scratching of chalk on newsprint seemed like a melody accompanying their perfect self-acceptance.

Because Cato was skilled at tasks demanding discipline of eye and hand, his drawings were precision models. What was on his page corresponded in its every ratio to the integrated form on the pedestal. The instructor had to call in colleagues to show how brilliantly his sketches beetled the forms; how his drawings went beyond western notions of caricature. The handling of skin was remarkable in itself: at first, it looked hard and brittle, but the line's slight tremor made the skin seem to crepitate. The body hair was an exacting script of single fibers. Toes and fingers had a life of their own. The head was a blank and that piqued the curiosity of his teacher. Fill it in, he said, but Cato had captured what had interested him, and what he could capture.

After those first few classes in life drawing, Cato was certain that very little of what he really saw on the platform could be transferred onto the flat. What he had realized in the irritable lines and dense shading was what the insensitive eye would see, but even that squib was enough to recall what had stood,

slumped, sat, leaned, stretched straight or buckled. For the first time in recollection, his curiosity had found conditions for its satisfaction. He didn't want it all to come at once. It was better to feel the sensation gathering and complicating within him, but also in the triangle of space between his eye, the page, and the specimen life on the pedestal. There was much to be gained in that space, too. No one could stop him from encumbering it with fancies.

But he didn't want any more teacherly disturbances or commentary, so he drew no more of his bristling cartoons, "like Rembrandt," as one teacher had said, "after Hiroshima." He prepared his pages to render what he saw. There were techniques he had to master: not just the creation of thickness on the flat, or the separation of the far from the near, but how to invent a cipher for the feeling that had stunned him that first day, upon seeing these bodies nude in space.

The class was on Saturday, and Cato had to drive twenty-five miles into Cairo, where the state university had its extension. He stopped at a luncheonette along the way. There wasn't much between his town and Cairo. Outside the grimy window was a field of tall grass and thistles. A flock of blackbirds coiled up from the ground, circled in air, and dove back into the tall grass. The sensation of joy tapping in on the spine rose from there to the vertebrae of his neck, spinning in rings of rich black and red. Cato ordered coffee to prolong the thrill. Today was the last day of the summer session. He had completed full-length drawings of all the models. The drawings were life-like, but without the tension of his first work. He was in the process of collecting the figures and engaging them on a single sheet of paper. Bound together, something would goad them out of their inertia. He

didn't want mere mechanical life for these graceful figures, but what else could be found in such a short time?

Even as this new pursuit was making Cato more a mystery to himself, it was clarifying his view of others. For reasons of their own, his family had never sought or taken up such an invitation as he'd arranged for himself in these art classes. Lila was afraid of an open field and an open question and avoided both. With an ailing mother and no father, she had raised herself and a kid brother. Her world was forever bounded by the Navy, and later by Cato's company and expanded, as far as the boys had made names and places for themselves, to her sons' colleges and fraternities and fiancées, promotions, hobbies, and accomplishments. The boys were happy at being what they were: American boys, and now men. From their mother they had learned the art of keeping busy as, even now, paying his bill, he looked to be busy, filling his retirement years with fruitful activity.

Ten years ago, the doctors had given him a year to live and, every year after, added a year, neither more nor less. His blood was thick and his heart a weak organ with several holes from birth, although in those early days, unnoted. Lila had insisted on prompt repair work and the first re-routing of his blood lines had him dead on the table for some minutes; the second surgery brought on six months of paralysis and there was a third crisis, but he wasn't ready to die and she wasn't ready, as she told the Oakleys, their friends and long-time neighbors, to sign off on him. Everyone laughed when she said it, but the remark stayed fresh in Cato's mind. For him, the principal irritant, as always, was Lila's audacity: did she think she was God? While Cato was centering his curiosity on her, she was ordering blood pumped to his head. If she'd needed—for his replenishment—to pump that blood through her own organs, she'd have done it. His Irish

son, Carl, the youngest, returned home for the long recuperations, playing cards and checkers and drinking his beer drowned in ice, Carl's way of preempting the Callahan genius for drinking. He had reckoned his ice factor in inverse proportion to the beer. Satiation, that way, always trumped inebriation. It was an isolated touch of true Munk calculus blended smoothly with one-part Callahan gumption. Carl was a good son, but had gotten the least from either of them, and maybe that was the key to his peace of mind.

It had been young Carl's sack suit that had clothed his grandfather for his last presentation on earth. Carl had also been the one to build the indoor and outdoor ramps for Cato's wheelchairs and the glassed-in deck where the winter sunshine coupled with the long hours of lassitude—the first unbroken rest Cato had enjoyed since childhood—to restore his body's chemistry. His health rebounded, unfamiliar to him in its abundance. He was stringy and somewhat shrunken, but the restored chemistry brightened up his skin and sharpened his taste buds. The months of bed rest had given him a new, soft padding, at first a bit flaccid, but of a smaller, and thus easier mass to shape and tone.

This was the body that fit the silk-and-linen blend suit made in the 1940s; these were the arms and doughty legs that shot the sleeves and tunneled into the smooth pant legs, stirring the sawdust that had settled over the forty years hanging in the unfinished attic. The suit had been custom-made by a Chinese tailor in San Francisco. Cato had never seen clothing under construction, and he found it a surprising feat of engineering. The cloth was first pinned inside-out to a tissue-paper maquette, and then cut with pinking shears, chalked, hand-basted, lined, and faced, then machine-sewn into a honeycomb of stitches. The mate-

rial was riddled, webbed, waffled, and folded there where it was molded to fit the shape of the shoulder or under the arm. One kind of work was layered onto another. The underworks were a field of chaos until the garment was turned right-side-up and its crude machinery hidden under a silk lining.

His father had not a single suit "to his name," as Lila put it, but Cato had had a suit made to order in that thrilling time after the war, in late fall, when his girl came on by cross-country train. To judge from the photos, he still had a boy's unmarked face, while Lila, with her fur tippet and black velvet hat, looked like Joan Crawford.

Cato came back from the Pacific with malaria. Was he feverish when he ordered a suit made out of Chinese silk? It was a shade with threads of black and blue, but, at a distance, it resolved into the silver of a clear mirror. Yet he was not a fashion plate, or bird of paradise, and didn't have color in his own plumage, as Lila did, with the carroty hair that even the Mick boys didn't carry off from their union. And that red was the perfect foil for a suit of silver-gray, that flame-red hair with the large green eyes. They were married out there on the west coast, but he wore his dress whites and she a suit of green taffeta. They danced at the hotel to "Apple-Blossom Time," and celebrated the marriage again back in Natick, but he never wore the made-to-order suit then or after. She didn't care for it, was one reason, but was too shy or polite to put into words what was so plain on her face. That kind of high cockalorum was precisely what she didn't expect from a man like Cato. In another man, maybe she might have tolerated it, at first. But Cato was security and even stability, with his yellow, malarial face and thin frame. Even Rolla had not construed his eldest son so narrowly. Cato felt

it that instant in the tailor shop, when he was "modeling" the silver suit with the pockets still sewn shut.

The last drawing class had already begun when Cato arrived on that steamy day. All the windows were flung open and fans whipped up the air, but the model, the youngest one, was all but melting under the pot lights. She stood dripping on a green towel. Although small, she was the most pleasing of the models with sturdy legs and healthy-looking shoulders and arms. With one unbroken line, Cato penned her outline from jawbone to the ear just above it, including in the loop the straw-colored hair that capped her head like a bell. This figure enclosed in one line was entered at the base of the page where his family of models had been collecting over the last few classes. They were a family because they were connected on several axes and in many visual patterns. They could, by extending an arm, or sometimes just a finger, touch each others' shoulders or hands. They structured the page like an espaliered apple tree. This heat, on this late summer day (he noted, when his line closed in on itself) seemed tailor-made for his suit. He knew this because—hot though he was, and sweating profusely at all joints and foldings where limb met torso—the suit body broke clean from his humid skin, with a heartbeat all over the surface. It felt as cool as water.

There was space for all the family on the large newsprint sheet, the large figures and the small. Today's model was confined to less than two inches, while the grandmotherly figure on top, shaped like a boulder on pegs, was a giant. Three men made a six-inch deep frieze in the center: one was striding forward with his weight on the back leg, one was in pot-bellied profile, staring down at his feet; and the third was reaching up to

hold one of his grandmother's pegs in his hand. Now Cato was drawing a man in a suit, using that tense and bristling line that had so amazed his teachers, and only then, when the cooling jet of dark blood flushed like a rose in his brain, would he be done.

Transference

The first patient of the day was eight-year-old Isabel. Isabel brought her doll, which sat in the chair opposite his. The patient sat against the wall and told him he could look at her if he took off his glasses or looked with one eye. The doll, made of cloth, with a head but no face, was a blabbermouth, and Isabel asked him to slap her face, and if he didn't, she'd slap his. Why would you slap my face? he asked. Because I want to, she'd say, and with that, the ritual greeting was accomplished.

Isabel's five-year-old sister, Evelyn, was run over by a car while the family was traveling in Italy. Isabel had tossed the doll into the road because her sister had insisted on holding its free hand, and mother was threatening to take the doll away if Isabel continued so selfish. The marriage hadn't survived the trauma. Father wasn't present on the day of the accident. He was conducting business from the hotel, business he'd promised to forego for the week away, but a looming worry had become a crisis. His wife knew the matter could have waited till their return, and she proved right, as the father had explained to Dr. Broad in an early session arranged just for him. He was the one who'd gotten the referral for Isabel. The children were a handful

and the trip had been a series of battles between the sisters, each egged on by a partial parent, because Isabel was her mother in miniature, while Evelyn was the image of her father's favorite sister: quiet, industrious, and easily hurt. The family was already fractured when the father lost his child through his wife's negligence. The surviving child's symptoms were described differently by each parent, but coincided on the point that Isabel had shown no remorse for the recklessness that had killed her sister.

Dr. Broad had been seeing Isabel for six months, four days a week, in the hour before school started. The parents had tried to separate her from the infamous doll, which the younger sister had reached and was clutching when struck. Some bystander had retrieved it and Isabel reclaimed it on the spot. It wasn't until late that night, leaving the hospital, that the shattered couple noticed the bloody rag. Isabel produced it for their eyes from her backpack, although the mother had been sedated and the father scarcely took it in. He'd already consigned this child to oblivion. He'd only wanted one and that one came second and was now lost to him forever.

Dr. Broad was grateful for the chance to study the doll, having heard its singular role in the family history. It had a soft head and tube body with floppy limbs. Its hair, though, was the slick, spongy stuff of a Barbie. The doctor had a hard time attaching a name to it, although it came strangely to life when sitting in the room. Isabel called it Ann Marie. She made its clothes out of scraps from her mother's dressmaking shop, after stripping the gingham dress sewn to its body. The doll had a dress for each of the four days that Dr. Broad saw them.

"Does she go to school?" he asked, the day they met.

"She goes," Isabel said, "but she won't learn."

"Do you learn?" he said, turning his head to address the child, although Isabel had warned him not to make that mistake or be fined.

"I don't have a dollar on me," he said.

"Well, make it ten."

"Just remind me, Isabel," he said, "or turn your chair in the other direction."

The child shook her head. "No way, and you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because you'd look and how would I know? I want you to keep your fat eyes off me."

The patient's face reminded him of a drawing made by another child patient. The picture had a hard crayon outline, and the surface had been rubbed with a tissue to make it shine. Isabel's face was dark with glossy, black eyes, a strong nose, and round cheeks. She was missing front teeth and spoke with her lips close together. Her smile, though, was brilliant and made her seem like a different child, when some "demented" thing he said caused the lips to curl. She was innately seductive and at her ease perched on an armchair with her feet up on the hassock. She wore black pumps with jeans and a t-shirt.

"What shall we talk about?" he said that morning. It was Isabel's last week of school, but the family planned to stay home that summer, and the sessions would continue unbroken.

Isabel blew out her breath and slunk down. Dr. Broad had been practicing so long in his room that his side vision—or maybe the acuteness of his hearing—gave him access to Isabel's every gesture and look.

"Talk to *her*," she said. "She's got something to say."

"I like talking to her," he said, "but today I'd rather talk to

you." He had been moving in this direction for some weeks, testing each step. Isabel enjoyed his awkwardness in changing the terms of their session.

"No one likes Ann Marie," she said. "No one I know."

"What about you?"

"I do the talking, she does the listening." The child stood up on the chair to examine his diplomas and license, whose salient facts she'd memorized and could recite: Yale College, Yale School of Medicine, University of London, Tavistock Clinic, Massachusetts General Hospital, Commonwealth of Massachusetts. "You're the only one," she said, "who listens to what she says."

"I ask her to talk because you want me to, Isabel."

"I make you!" With that, she started to recite the stages of his education. She popped her cheeks and sat down.

"What shall we talk about today, Isabel? How's school?"

At that moment, Ann Marie began her recital. She'd been punched in the schoolyard and yelled at in third period for something she didn't even know about, and had an onion for lunch.

"Did your mom pack the onion for her?" he asked.

"I did."

"And what did Mom pack for you?"

"Cream puffs and olive oil, a loaf of bread and a pound of salami."

"Really? You must have been very hungry."

"And a roast-beef sandwich with fish sticks."

"Did you eat your lunch with Ann Marie or with someone else?"

"My sister's dead," she said. "It's my fault, boohoohoo and a

bottle of rum. Let Ann Marie talk or I'll kill your face and punch your eyes."

Dr. Broad let the child's words stand, hoping to create the space that most patients, even the young ones, jumped to fill in. Isabel waited too.

"Ann Marie can talk whenever she wants to, Isabel."

"Isabel Isabel Isabel," she said.

He waited.

"I'm going home. You can stay here with her and talk your stupid head off," she said.

"You're angry at me today, Isabel," he said. "Why? Will Ann Marie tell me why?"

"Why don't you ask her."

The session was nearly over and Dr. Broad spent the minutes left advising the doll on how to help her friend, who was angry and sad. Did she know what to do? Yes, of course, she did. Remind Isabel to take the meds, do her homework, and write her poem. Did she have a poem to give him today? Well, okay then, he'd see them both on Monday.

He rose to hand the doll to his patient, who was sucking her thumb. She left his office with Ann Marie dangling from her mouth. Dr. Broad watched while she took her babysitter's hand, after the older girl pulled the doll from the child's jaws and stuffed it into the backpack. The babysitter was the only adult the child chose to obey.

Dr. Broad had a few minutes before his next case. He sat down in the doll's chair and closed his eyes. He pictured his patients' problems as wounds—holes, abrasions, burns, and lesions. His job was not just to heal the wound but to teach the patient how to respect the scar, because there was always some

trace left behind. Each case taught him something new. Isabel's wound was still so fresh that the damaged nerves hadn't communicated to the brain, but that message was coming. He would make her—when she was ready—rehearse the steps that led to pitching the toy into the busy street, and then name all the links that tied the lethal aftermath to the child's dearest wish. This work would take a long time, but his patient would come out with the wound so aggravated that the self around it would crumble. He and she would locate all the essential pieces and restack them, testing where the ruin needed reinforcement. Rarely did his child patients resist the demolition; often, they began it themselves, sensing better than an adult the value of sacrificing a self that was mostly a parental creation.

He opened his eyes and used the time left to study a photo of the next patient. He had portraits taken of his difficult cases in the early weeks of treatment. To tune himself between sessions, he studied the pictures. The photo in hand showed a male head in profile, for that was the view selected out of the dozen shot. From the side, there was no color or sheen to Burke's blue eyes: they looked like machine parts, calibrated to grasp, protected by their bone chalices. The patient's skull armored the head like a helmet; but below, the jowls and neck gathered in thick, soft folds. The profile was of a rocky, deep-bayed coast.

Aside from the rippling anger, regular as a chop on the sea, the man's face was unreadable, never easy to confront or disarm, even across the barrier of the desk. (Burke had claimed the straight chair, and that choice put the doctor behind his desk, a place reserved for early consultations.) When the patient assumed all of the desk's authority, Dr. Broad took up the passive position, as he would any position that served the treatment.

The man's gaze was direct, and the fallen flesh of the jowls

seemed less a slackening of tone than a reserve of force. Dr. Broad addressed him as Mister, when he used his name, and was never invited to be more familiar. They had discussed this in the sessions, but the probing had not gone far.

"Good morning," he said, opening the second of the connecting doors and allowing his patient to precede him, sniffing the air as he always did. An interval of ten minutes passed before Dr. Broad intervened. Classical treatment would preserve the silence for the rest of the hour, if necessary. Dr. Broad cleared his throat and smiled (another contamination). "May I ask what you're thinking?"

The patient seemed deaf, as if he could block his ears by fiat. The man had come to him for help, but after four months of biweekly meetings, was still in the trial stage, assessing the value of this analyst, although he hadn't consulted any others. Patients sometimes tested for years, but intermittently, and their soundings were often an appeal to stop the work or slow it down so the pain could be mastered.

"Nothing," the patient said. "The minute I come in here, my brain shuts off. I told you that. It's not working and I came to say it again."

"That's what you're thinking, then," the doctor said. "It's not nothing."

They had begun.

Roger Burke was forty-five, married with a stepchild. A retired Navy pilot, he ran a flight school and a small-craft airport. His oral history had been dry and grudging, but a light scratch of the surface turned up childhood neglect, parental neurosis, and—in the mother's case—late-onset psychosis: paranoia with schizoid tendencies. He had married young—no children—and remarried in middle age to a lawyer with a daughter now six-

teen. Presenting symptoms: insomnia and generalized anxiety, which the patient insisted was exigent and inviolable.

"So, you're thinking of leaving me?" the doctor said.

The patient snorted. "You have a weird way of putting it, Doctor."

"How would you put it?"

"It's not working."

"Just last week you told me you slept through the night."

"That's because I spent the night on the couch. You forget that critical detail."

"But the following night—Wednesday I think it was—before our Thursday meeting—you said you slept pretty well, next to Cathy."

"Pretty well is not well. I was exaggerating." (The word "Cathy"—and the familiar way it was said—caused the usual spasm of irritation.)

"That doesn't sound like you—to exaggerate, I mean," the doctor said.

"You're talking an awful lot today, Dr. Broad. Isn't that against your religion?" He paused. "And doesn't that tell you something about the so-called treatment?"

"What does it tell you?"

"That you're paddling without an oar," he said, as if coining a phrase. It was the man's most expressive utterance, and it was heartbreaking.

The doctor let it stand, then smiled. "Well, that's my problem, isn't it? You're telling me you should be doing the talking, this is your hour, and you're right."

"But I've got nothing to say that I haven't already said."

"You're expressing your frustration, and you're angry with me for not helping you in an expedient way. You're suffering and

I've done nothing to help. Or maybe what I have done has made it worse."

"I'm not 'suffering,' as you put it."

Dr. Broad let this stand. His patient continued. "This is an absurdity."

"What's absurd about it?"

After another silence, Dr. Broad said: "Let's try a different tack. You don't feel entitled to devote time and money to your own treatment. You're ashamed and you're embarrassed."

His patient rolled his eyes. Dr. Broad continued. "You're as stingy to yourself as your father was to you. He gave you nothing, except what he was strictly obligated to give." The doctor's voice slowed and found its pulse, as if reciting a verse familiar to them both. "What he did do was wait till the end of his life to give you—I'm using your words here—the ultimate kick in the balls."

"It wasn't personal," the man said, then resumed silent, his eyes flicking back and forth, a sign, as he admitted himself, of intense and rapid reflection, the quality of which Dr. Broad still didn't know. Suddenly, the face fell and the eyes closed. "Don't mistake this," he said, under his breath. "This bullshit exhausts me more than a week's work."

The doctor waited. He tried to maintain the alert vacancy called for in analysis, but couldn't banish the image of a bomb in an eggshell. He could have said, "What comes to my mind is a picture," but experience with males of rigid discipline and lifelong repression kept him mute. He watched as his patient tried to purge some thought or feeling taking shape in the last minute. He felt his own face tighten.

After retiring, and while the patient was still overseas, his father had refused all help for his wife, who was dying, caring for her himself and holing up in their house with ventures out

only for necessities. On furloughs home, the patient had seen his mother getting sicker. Frustration with his own neglect of his parents had damaged the patient's first marriage beyond repair. A few months after the mother's death, the father was rushed to the hospital with a massive heart attack. When the old man was out of danger, the patient had visited with paperwork that needed signatures. Dr. Broad had not yet heard what they said to each other that day, but that night, barely able to walk, the father had crawled out of bed and pitched himself out the twelfth-story window.

Dr. Broad had heard this story during the man's first visit. He delivered it as if reporting to a senior officer, although after that, the patient addressed the doctor as a subordinate. When asked about this, the patient said that this was his natural way of addressing nonmilitary and not to be offended: his wife didn't much like it either.

At the end of the hour, Mr. Burke confessed—as he put it—to some easing of the "mental tourniquet," but added that Dr. Broad's theatrical ways may well have tightened the tourniquet, adding to what were manageable "life problems."

"Interestingly put," the doctor said. "We'll talk about your theory next time." Dr. Broad reminded his patient that twice a week was not enough contact time to maintain the level of intensity achieved that day.

The patient laughed. "You're at it again," he said. "Save your advertisements for someone else."

Dr. Broad cleared his mind, consulted his photos, and saw patients three and four, a woman professor with cancer and a young girl with florid bipolarity who'd just dropped out of col-

lege for the third time in three years. The professor's face on paper was a serene, fleshless mask; the agony was all in the voice and the unblinking brown eyes. The young girl had four different faces: sad, raging, exhilarated, and sullen, none captured by the camera.

Patient three was dying. She feared that what she needed to say was something no one—not the attentive spouse, not the friends—wanted to hear, so he listened. There wouldn't be time for much more. He encouraged her to say more by amplifying her ideas and feelings to a scale they could appreciate together. They found different narratives for what had already happened and was about to happen, daredevil steps and death-defying stages upon which to focus her panic and despair. There would be time, he promised her, to finish these stories.

The last patient had been in a manic state these past weeks, building toward the crisis—inevitable, in spite of the stepped-up course of mood-dampeners. She arrived twenty minutes late, wearing two different shoes, her long hair cut short and ragged. She stared at him, her eyes blinking in a regular rhythm. He had taken this patient from a colleague who was treating the mother, sole caretaker of another daughter and a husband, likewise afflicted. The girl needed something more, he felt, than a drug regimen and the biannual hospitalization, regular as clockwork, but the intensive treatment, with its hard-earned remediations, was risky with this depth of illness. In the state she was now in, Ms. Meyer was unreachable through words. He was trying play therapy, but today his patient was upset by the toys and set about dismembering the doll family. She rayed the legs, long and short, in a circle on his desk and arranged the torsos in a second circle with the head balls at the center. She was talking

so fast—whispering—that he could barely hear, but when she'd finished her work, she leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes.

"What have you done?" he asked, but she shook her head, her arms hanging limply.

It was cases like this one that were hard to set aside at the end of the day and had been the reason he chose a specialty aimed at high-functioning neurotics. "Hard cases," such as his own mother's had been, in and out of hospital, denatured by primitive controls, including the electric current that raked out memory and snuffed personality, were beyond his skill. Jane Meyer was twenty, but looked like a withered child, bone-thin, with burn marks on her arms and neck and a dozen rings in each ear, a stud in the tongue.

Her voice was surprisingly deep—when she spoke above a whisper. "Do you have anything to drink?" she asked, with her eyes still shut.

"There's a water fountain in the corridor," he said, "and paper cups in the waiting room. Get yourself a drink. Leave the door open to come back in."

"Get me some."

"I don't want to leave you here alone," he said, looking at his watch. "Shall we go together?"

"Never mind," she said, opening her eyes. They were beautiful. Open, they brought the thin face to life.

"You feel better," he said. "I can see that."

She leaned over to finish her work, inserting legs and arms into their sockets. In the box, where the dolls sat, their magnetized legs folded, was clothing for all the members, and the patient proceeded to sort through dresses and blouses.

"Where are they going?" he asked.

"Can you help me, please," she said. "I've got a splitting headache and I'll get the colors wrong."

"Tell me where you're sending them."

She smiled and gazed at him. "I'm sending them straight out of this nut farm."

"Are you going with them?"

"They're going by themselves. Here," she said, handing him the second drawer. "Dress the boy dolls."

They played for the extra time he offered her to make up for the lateness—a mistake from all points of view, but he wanted to draw more from the session. They were going somewhere today and even the patient knew it.

When his office was empty and the outer door locked, he opened his lunch. His wife, May, was forever finding new ways to pack it, and the Japanese style—using squares of colorful, printed cloth or sheets of rice paper—was the latest. All of the wrapped elements were rolled in a stiff orange packet, which he carried under his arm. He took pains, after examining and consuming the offerings, to re-wrap the boxes—not as well as she, a paper artist, did it, but carefully enough to experience the pleasure she took in the colors and textures. May wasn't a cook so the lunch was such as a child might make: a hard-boiled egg and square of cheese, an apple and small stack of Fig Newtons or a brownie. For their anniversary, she'd given him a single setting of plain-white but delicate china and silver cutlery, a wine glass, and a tumbler. Sometimes she folded a note into the lunch bundle. Today there was no note, so, after he'd spread out his repast, each item on its own wrapper, he spent his hour reading May's diary, the early teenage volumes in small, leatherette books with locks and hanging keys. He found her words soothing and funny. She had a relish for life and recorded the weather

and something of each person encountered, what they said and wore, and how they connected to each other and to her. After washing his dish and glass and re-wrapping his package, he lay down on his couch.

With his eyes closed, his characters took their places in silence, the men on one side, women on the other, and the children on the floor between them. They were gathered together, and they sat within arm's reach of each other, but each seemed alone with unseeing eyes. Then, the singing began, a babel, no word distinct, but the tonalities clashing and merging as if someone were conducting them away and toward harmony. Sometimes they chanted, or droned, or a single voice broke the surface with a melody. All turned their faces toward that voice, but kept singing their own part—louder sometimes. One by one, after he entered, each voice was stilled and the exercise, when completed, left behind a richer silence. He kissed their faces and combed their hair with his fingers, he wrapped each of them in a sheet and lay them down where his other people were. How many? Hundreds. He piled them up in the cedar-scented room and locked the door. When he returned with their food, they had unwrapped each other and were ready to eat and live, to walk around, once he freed them, in an aimless way, so different from the tight circles and crooked squares, the dizzying loops and hard vectors they traced for the sake of furnishing their illness with exercise and air. But this lasted how long? A minute, before they were restless again and exited the cedar house to resume their places in his mind. They began to sing their dreadful songs. He woke up with his own mouth open.

He rubbed his eyes and wiped his glasses. There were five minutes before his first afternoon patient, Darrah, whose photo showed a woman with a harrowed face and enlarged, dreamy

eyes behind their thick lenses. Darrah was the image of his wife, inverted. She was an artist whose stylistic restlessness was fueled by desperation. She had no playfulness, only drive cut with self-contempt. There wasn't an inch of her undernourished psyche that wasn't raw and lacerated. During their talks, the dreamy lassitude of the eyes spread gradually to the tortured mouth and ropey neck. Never, though, had he seen her hands relax or drop the ball of tissue one shared with the other.

He unlocked his door and Darrah was already there, forever early, then eager to leave: polite, diffident, and alert.

She lay on the couch, after removing her shoes and smoothing her skirt. She lay each arm straight by the side of a lithe and well-kept body, which she preserved for the exigent eyes of a disparaging world. This he learned in the first interview, before she even opened her mouth to speak.

Her life was dissolving around her. The monster she'd married had emptied their bank accounts and taken the silver and jewelry, writing in lipstick on the bathroom mirror his name, his date of departure, and a curse. He was a long-blocked writer, and the curse, witty and obscene, was copied onto cards and tucked into her folded clothes, along with a heart slashed through with the sign of nullity. He had taken their car. A week or two later, she discovered he'd remortgaged the house, forging her signature. The bills and notices were still flowing in. The lawyer she could afford to hire was trying to untangle her liability from a spouse who now refused to sign off on a divorce, although he was living with someone else.

She didn't yet see how much she liked being hurt and used, how her family had instilled in her the taste for a parasite, someone who'd abuse and defile what he consumed in rage and disgust. It was casebook female masochism, but Dr. Broad didn't

see his patient as a cluster of symptoms. He saw her as his May in reverse, and May's vibrant health was a model for Darrah's restoration. He was starting with the free zone in her life: her artistic productions.

Today, lying before him, it seemed she'd lost something more. Her dealer had rejected the grasses etched on shards of brown glass—the work of the past year. Lineation of that fineness (done with surgical needles) would not sell to clients looking to break up huge white walls. It was an art, the dealer had said, for small rooms, and for a world where people had the time and patience to look hard. Even glass collectors had moved on to the bold and deep-dyed craft of the 1930s. Her work would hold up about as well as Emily Dickinson in the ring with Allen Ginsberg. That had made her laugh.

She explained all this in the soft voice that Dr. Broad closed his eyes to hear. She delivered the dealer's verdict without casting blame. Tastes had changed. They had changed long ago, and it had been her choice to ignore the change. She talked and he listened. At the end of the hour, she rose and presented him with the best of the lot, she said, because she owed him her life. They looked at the sleek brown oval whose graven image of bottlebrush was visible when glass, light, and eye met in alignment. He looked up from the shining glass to his patient's face and saw there what was needed. To give away something so valuable was this patient's food, and so he fed her.

With an hour before his next session, Dr. Broad left his office for the corporate park below and paced around it, head down. Darrah was like a burn victim. The charred skin would have to be scaled layer by layer before a viable surface was found.

The ablation would take years and his patient was running out of money. But she had no other choice but to submit.

He took a second turn under the ring of trees, each cut back to a branchless pole and bristly sphere. Their fruit and seeds had been swept from the turf and graveled path. Businessmen in insurance, telecom, and beauty products were never seen out here, but the women who worked for them issued at noon from the airtight building to smoke or eat a sandwich. There was no bench or wall. Only those psyches cropped like such corporate trees could survive in such a habitat. He and a few others of his kind were encased in the glass tower, but none of their clients and patients was drawn from the salesmen, schedulers, marketers, investors, and adjusters, or their raft of female helpers. This tribe was considered the healthy margin, but its insatiable appetite for gory spectacle betrayed frustration and morbid cravings. Boss and secretary were caged like pigs or farmed fish. None seemed to feel the deprivations and meanness. That such a penal zone was home to his craft was yet another sign that he, no less than his artist patient, was wildly out of step, imperiled.

His last patient was a fellow doc, twenty years older, who'd stepped down a few years ago as chief officer of a big hospital. The old man had detected in himself signs of cognitive failure, "idiocy," as he called it, and now couldn't stop crying. For fear he'd take his life, the wife had called for an appointment. Dr. Broad insisted on speaking to the patient, but barely recognized his voice. He prescribed something to make sure his colleague could make it to the office.

The psychiatrist put a fresh napkin on the couch pillow and brushed some dust from the footrest. He adjusted his drapes, to

soften the afternoon glare, and turned off the overhead light. When he heard the outer door open, he took a notepad from the bookcase and put on his glasses.

The old doctor, who'd come alone, was sitting with his head cocked back against the wall. His eyes were closed. Dr. Broad had taken no photo. His reason had been the man's condition, but also his own sensitivities. This procedure was an innovation, and he meant to publish something before exposing it to the world.

"Come in, Paul," he said, but the old man failed to move or open his eyes. His skin was slack and he was unshaven. Dr. Broad sat down next to him. "Shall we go in?" he said. The patient shook his head; his mouth was hanging open.

"You look beat," Dr. Broad said. "Have you been sleeping at all?"

The man seemed in no condition to talk.

"Shall we go in?" Dr. Broad said again. "Can I help you up?"

But here was the wife, holding out a paper bag. "I didn't know whether to bring him here," she said, "or to the emergency room." She shook out three bottles and handed them to the doctor.

"Tell me how many of these you gave him," she said, "so we know how many he took." She sat down and picked up one of her husband's limp hands. "He took aspirin, too, but there weren't that many left. Everything else I'd tossed."

Dr. Broad glanced at the labels and shook the bottles.

"It's okay," he said. "I didn't give that many, but he's in no shape for work today. I'll help you get him back in the car."

But alive suddenly, and agitated, Dr. Aronson didn't want to go back to the car. He stood up, steadied himself, and lurched into the consulting room. Dropping down on the couch, he was

snoring before Dr. Broad could even close his door. The psychiatrist looked down at the prone figure, bundled in a grubby gray sweat suit. Then he went out to speak to the wife.

"I'd like to admit him," he said, sitting down next to her.

"I think not," the doctor's wife said. "I can take care of him. There's no psych ward in this city—or in the state, for that matter—where they wouldn't know him. If anything were going to kill this poor soul—."

"It might be necessary," Dr. Broad said. "Why don't you let me take responsibility."

The wife gave him a look. "No," she said. "The responsibility is mine, when he's in this state."

"He's asleep in there," the doctor said, rising. "Can I help get him into your car?"

"Thanks," she said. "I knew that you—of all of them—would understand."

"I don't understand," he said quietly. "If there's that much stigma for someone who's spent his life—."

"You'd feel the same way yourself," she said.

They didn't hear the door, or see Dr. Aronson standing there, blinking.

"Paul," Dr. Broad said, smiling.

"Let's go," the old doctor said, yawning. "Forgive and forget." He reached the outer door and stood there again.

"I'll expect you here on Monday," Dr. Broad said to his back.

"I'll try," the wife answered, "but I can't force him."

"I could drop by the house, too. And I'll call in something for when he's like this. Do you have a safe place to keep it?"

The old doc turned to show them a livid face, grinning and streaked with tears.

Dr. Broad's day was over. His phone was ringing. He let the machine catch the message. His patients could call him at night or on the weekends, but they rarely called this early. He lay down on the couch with his head in the hollow made by their heads. He had the room to himself. The office and its outer shell were silent at this hour, and he watched the fiery sun swarm in the gap between his drapes.

Gold Leaf

He wanted to buy himself a present. He had enough stuff in his house for four houses, but what he had wasn't what he wanted. What he wanted (never before of any great importance) was becoming clear. Animal, mineral, or plant? He didn't want something alive, even if the life were minimal, like a cactus that needed water once or twice a year, or drank what it needed from a muggy August day.

How beautiful a thing and how much? That kind of question made him dizzy—the way it challenged his sensory apparatus and the education and improvement he had given it; also what he earned and could justify spending on himself.

Maybe he needed more than one. His wife would have bought him anything and as many of that as he wanted, but he didn't want to involve her this time. Her desire to please sometimes quenched his longings before they were even expressed. Kindness was his element, and he had made it hers, but when other impulses are suppressed, even a good thing becomes tainted with passion or aggression. Love was like that, and love had always been beyond him. It was the way he was built.

But she loved him like a god and no present good enough

for him was beyond her grasp. All her money was his, although from time to time she bought herself a present. Thoughts of her were always finite, like the chopped brown grass of winter. Did he love her? If someone like him produced love as a bodily effluent, the force could drown or suffocate, but he had never drawn it out. When mother and father knocked on his door, he was busy, and after, immature love had surged like a geyser, but the mannish girlfriend it engulfed soon surfaced, shook herself, and stalked away. Back inside him, the inflamed source with its boiling liquid yielded a host of curious illnesses, mild and chronic, and a circus of nervous symptoms. Self-care sealed him off from the world and from the partners who stepped forward.

She was the one he selected for a wife, but pupil was more like it. They bought a house, then a bigger one, and she filled it, consulting him at every stage, but somehow their committee of two furnished his homes with the meretricious. Things of quality in workmanship or precious materials came home and spoiled. Was it the light, too much and too white, of their lamps, or simply the stifling heat of the stove, the heat pump, the electric radiator, and the fireplace. There was fragrance, too: bath oil and perfume, potpourri and a steady diet of roasted meats and rich pies, the lanolin of furniture and floor polish, the sachet pouches hanging in closets and buried in drawers, the candles and soaps and small tissues tossed in the dryer that made the towels and pillowcases reek of an artificial garden.

With this overfullness, where would the present go? On his person? He wasn't self-decorative, but he dressed better than she did and picked his colors from nature: cats, tiger shrimp, the drabber sort of bird with a shot of color on the neck or under the wing. Brown-mustard and fresco paste, curry powder and the contrast between a shell and its nut—some years were easier

than others to locate his wedge of color. For the shirts and sweaters and knitted vests she selected for him, in navy and magenta and royal purple, he resorted to hand laundering, dry cleaning, or just leaving things to fade in a bright sun. He had taught her that a direct statement—not to mention anything with a knife edge—was not in their marital lexicon. Better to say nothing, much better not even to think a coarse or cross-grained thought. These rules were never spelled out. He was the model she imitated, when she could. Her fallings off were more noticeable now, when so much between them had been taken for granted.

He had been a bachelor and thought to remain one, but as his interest waned in other things—work, politics, and sport—an aching loneliness surfaced. By then, both his parents were dead and friends locked into icy pairings: with this one he watched the cup matches in satellite-TV bars; this other shared a passion for book collecting; a third accompanied him two or three times a year to strip bars and gambling casinos; a fourth read his essays as he finished them and before he sent them off to his publisher.

She had been long on the scene, sweet and available as a bar of candy. An old-fashioned, home-loving girl whose pocketbook smelled of peppermint. She loved to talk, and he could rest from his labors of thinking or worrying in her slightly salty chat, watching her flushed cheeks and naturally tinted lips. Compared to the women he knew who were in his field, she was without self-consciousness or pretensions. Her thoughts cycled through their early dates, and then recycled. In half a year, all the thoughts she voiced were his, but brighter and connected in a simple line. She could absorb any of his opinions and work out the kinks or knots and smooth out any thickness. What could he do but make the knots tighter, or abandon the lines already

released and seek a new depth. In a year, his thoughts in her mouth were unrecognizably pat, or laughably child-proofed. But, in that same year, she had welcomed his cool body with affection and pleasure—even rapture—into her own.

In this way, his dry and long-starved roots were set in a warm, well-watered soil, and for a few months of their marriage, his skin had the healthy burnish of a bronze idol. His stomach was peaceful inside him and his nerves well covered. But she didn't touch his source, and, in the second year, the heat and drive within him broke the coverings and he was dyspeptic and heart-sick. Their life together became a mutual pursuit of things to please him, or at least to calm him so that he didn't pace through the night or sicken. His skin was yellowing, he was slow-moving, and the overall gentleness was less than it seemed.

He went to the fourth floor of Hudsons' and, on top of an ebony chest with brass fittings, found a plump, golden bird with folded wings. Was it a dove? Its wings were set with smooth glass pebbles—glass, moonstone, or white jade: they reminded him of stones on his mother's bracelet. He had it in his hand, and a salesgirl was offering its papers and a price. There was nothing else like it in the store, and never before, she said, had she seen something like it. The size and shape of an apple, it was solid something—brass, probably—painted with gold leaf and studded with lumps of jade. It was from China, made around 1910. It wasn't the kind of item normally found in a department store. It was a vessel—see how it opens? A musty odor of seasoned wood was only one of its fragrant emanations. "Here," she said, "it comes in this box." The box was covered in an animal hide, not leather but reptile skin with markings to match

the jade lozenges on the wings. The skin was a green he'd not seen since childhood, when upholstery, rugs, and drapes were all dark and every color saturated with brown or black. The box was a perfect foil for the gilded bird.

"Incense," she said, "was kept in it, or coins. It might have served as a tea caddy." No, he said, because the wood lining would perfume the tea. The lining of a once-living material spoiled it, he thought, by introducing such marvels. But warmed it, too, she said, and he realized that his criticism was visible on his face, in the forehead knot that was tracing its first wrinkle in his poreless skin. "Would you like to bring it home?" she said. "Take it and see. Everything here's returnable." 'Here' was what he'd thought was the floor for furniture and housewares, but no, everything from the enameled chairs to the fantastically carved tables was of a different order, a jumble, but nothing mass-produced, not even two of any one thing. This part of the store was not well kept. It was dusty and the lighting was glary; the floors were splintery wood, unvarnished pine.

He noticed that the salesgirl wasn't wearing just a simple charcoal suit, with blue blouse, but rather a uniform, like those worn by matinee ushers. Her face was a pure oval with blue-green eyes. Until looking closely, he hadn't realized that he encapsulated women into one type or another, and this girl—ageless and smooth—seemed too amorphous for a capsule. He was startled and lost sight for a minute of what errand he was trying to accomplish, or even that the bird was in his hand.

"If I take it, I'll keep it," he said.

"Well, perhaps you'd like to look around and see what else we have."

He didn't want to "look around," but followed her to the end of an aisle, to a stack of carpets and an urn filled with tiles and

tesserae, from Iran or Iraq, she said. The tide of religious revolutions made such luxuries worthless, even a danger to possess.

He was looking hard at this girl to find some detail to help him fix her, her background and training, and why she'd ended up selling odd lots in a downtown store soon to be bulldozed and its contents trucked to thriving suburban outposts. And what did the uniform signify?

She was called away by the floor walker, and he trailed back to the trunk where the bird was perched on a square of velvet. It had a rudimentary face—eyes and nose holes—but the beak was finely carved and slightly open, where a piece of dark tongue could be seen. Its feathering was intricate, as were its feet and claws. It closed so perfectly that its wood-lined hollow might go unnoticed.

But fifteen hundred dollars was more than he wanted to spend, if the present would be just another knickknack whose allure would be undermined by the countless others, all hand-selected.

So, he left the store, descending the escalator as his salesgirl emerged from a door in the back wall. He couldn't tell whether she'd seen him. The place was too dusty for words, and he needed a smoke. He hadn't smoked since the early days of his marriage, but he hadn't promised anything to anyone.

Outside in the winter's sinking light was a bright stream of traffic—colored cars coated with ice or icy rain. It was piercingly cold with a crust underfoot that crackled like peanut shells. He had an old pack of cigarettes in his coat pocket and one match, whose light was snuffed before his hand could reach his mouth; so he took the cigarette between his lips and bit it. The strong taste, woody and fermented, decided him. He cleaned his tongue with a handkerchief after spitting the tobacco and paper

in the gutter. His legs were splashed, but he re-entered the store with fifteen minutes to closing.

The gilt bird was crated and she was wrapping it with twine. The slip was made out with a discount. The bird was his for twelve hundred dollars and tax. He couldn't buy it like this, he said. He needed to look again. She was already untying the knots and rolling the twine around her hand.

The bird, wrapped in a satin sock, was nested in rice paper. The reptile-skin box was packed in its own sack of contrasting satin. He was eager to see what she might have packed in the bird's cavity. Surely there was something there for him, and whatever it was, no bigger than a white-footed mouse, it would fit his need more precisely than what had swallowed it.

He wanted to see, but the store was closing and unless she made the sale in the next few minutes, he would have to wait till it re-opened at nine thirty, and this was her last day, she said. She'd come from a temporary agency with a contract for two weeks.

"Is that a uniform for something else?" he asked.

"It's my own."

She re-crated the bird and box and carried them to the check-out counter, where the supervisor was ringing up totals on the day's sales. It was too late, he said, even if they went to the lobby floor, where the safes were. No further sale could be made. It was the last business day of the month and closing was fifteen minutes early, company policy.

They walked out of the store together. He waited for her to sign out and gather her belongings, which she carried in an overseas airline bag.

He had a car, he said. "Can I give you a lift?"

"I'm not going far," she said.

"I would like to spend some time just talking to you," he said. "I've never met anyone like you."

"People say that to me," she said, "but I don't know what they mean by it."

"Would you sit down with me? Could I buy you something to drink? You must be tired and thirsty."

SHE'S NOT EVEN A BEAUTIFUL GIRL, or young, he thought, as they sat in a tea garden. "It's the end of the day," she'd said, "but the end of my job, too." Her hands touched everything on the table. The hands were beautiful with long, straight fingers and pearly nails. She would have washed them and coated them with some redemptive cream after a day spent among corrosive metals and dirty glass and pottery. "I don't know where to begin," he said, listening to his plaintive tone, one that was available to him but never selected.

"Your bird?"

That would be you, was his thought.

Because he never wanted something to be marred by a remark or gesture, he decided to extend no invitations. Just sitting in her cool presence, watching her sip a very black tea with no lemon slice bumping against her teeth was satisfying. And she seemed to have no desire to talk. Desires seemed alien to her being. She seemed to contain within herself all she needed. But he was irritated by the sight of the uniform with its pindots and cloth-covered buttons. She might need nothing but she had at one time been someone's or something's slave.

"I worked," she said, seeing his glance, "at the old Hippodrome. That was years ago, but the uniform was a going-away gift."

"I've never heard of it," he said.

"It was the crown jewel of the city."

"This is not my city, as you might know from my accent."

"I can't place it," she said. "A romance language, yes," she said, "but some small border nation, half of something and half of something else, like the Basques."

"When you place me somewhere," he said, allowing his tone to round out and overfill, "I'll know I've been found and I'll stay there, wherever it is you place me."

"I'm no geographer," she said, and he saw her small, even teeth. Her skin was so pale that the blue-green eyes glowed like stones on a bed of hot sand. To look was to dissolve. It was the sensation he loved, but how to keep it fresh and original, not to distort or weaken it, or stuff it with false feeling.

He reached across the table to take one of the hands laid out flat with fingers extended. It resisted being folded, showing by flexes of muscle and bone its tensile complexity. Then the life went out of it and it felt like a sumptuous fabric, ancient and of a dissolving softness. He lifted it from the table and kissed the long thumb.

She removed the hand from his to encircle her cup, slipping a finger through the handle and locking it there.

"I don't mean to scare you," he said, using both hands to smooth his tie, then checking his watch, signaling for the bill. The mood had passed, and past and future lined up before his mind's eyes in a rational pattern and with correct spacing. The force of it clarified his location in the tea garden with so many tea sippers around him, most women, but an elderly male couple just to the left, and now their red-fingered waitress with the long wrists tearing a leaf from her pad. This salesgirl he'd picked up from Hudsons' in her obscure livery was leaving for the restroom and a chance for escape presented itself.

Everything held solid for the minute it took him to find his car in the nearly abandoned parking lot and to insert his key first into the door and then into the ignition. Exiting into the gleaming black street, he felt the outer layer of crisp pictures and pinpoint actions crumble, leaving him only with the armor of thought. Under that was the ungroomed, lawlessly driven body. He wheeled past a handful of dark-coated pedestrians, any of whom could be she, but he resisted the urge to hydroplane onto the sidewalk. His life—all forty years of it—had been brewing this surprise.

He stopped his car. "Get in," he said, flinging open the door at true north.

LET THE DANCE BEGIN. Home had built within its confining walls a ferocious, engulfing warmth, warmth of personality and napped fabric and running bath water and carnivorous feeding. His hunger was slaked only by the labor of his legal wife's exfoliations: everything was cooked beyond its normal ratio of integrity versus dissolution. Cooked so hard and so fast that solids were burnt into solids and puree of carrots or broccoli was a silken mass of iron filings—fibrous units superfortified by intense heat. Eating this food, which was both luscious and repulsive, strengthening and indigestible, he longed for the metal bird he had forfeited. If he could place his coated tongue on its gold-leaf feathers or into its sharp brass beak, or cool his cankers and fever blisters on the smooth stones of its back, he could re-gather the threads of his former life, or even a shadowy outline of his former mind. But by now the store was abandoned and emptied to its shell and whatever had been sheltered on that special floor released to the four winds to scatter among junkshops and auc-

tion houses, job lots, flea markets, and swap meets. Don't look for that bird, he'd told himself upon awakening with some shred of sleep-potentiating hope.

In the deep fold of afternoon, the hour between the end of the workday and the start of home life, he found his gallow's bird in her half-dozen roosts, where she thinned his fatty blood with astringent alcohols and fiery streams of black tea and coffee. All they did was talk. ("All we do is talk," he had in the loop in his head, already wound and set to unreel in real time), but the talk had abraded his exposed face and hands and he went home burnt and lacquered, an exhibit of raw health, so different from the pasty, clay-colored specimen that left the house at eight in the morning. Her words—when she spoke—ate into his substance. It was ecstasy: every part of him was alive under the burnt and lacquered skin. But leaving the cafe, bar, tearoom, or lounge, the charge drained. "I'm living on you," he said once over a cocktail that was both ice-cold and clearer than water.

"We could take it a step farther," she said, and this produced a picture vivid in his mind of a beautiful, curving staircase, firm and feathered, bright and subtle. But there were still words she hadn't used. He knew this because he could think of some, but she'd come up with them and need no prompting.

"Finish your drink," she said.

Her story was—but she didn't tell it. That was half the art of it. He gathered no details to savor after the twilit banquets, so exhausting to consume. They had one life to share—his—and what she did was multiply its value and strength, and even its facets, which were in him without his knowing it. She drew these out and they inventoried and marveled and tested and conjectured. He opened like a fan and turned like a kaleidoscope and produced jewel upon jewel under these master hands.

His cook, who cleaned his nest and cared for his life-sapped body, was doing her part, but in the dark. Days were spent rolling shopping carts in and out of markets and filling lacy net sacks with paper-wrapped packages of meat and fish, brains, giblets, cutlets, wings, necks, livers, and hearts. She bought herself an extra-large, extra-strong stove that never went cold. Bones and teeth could melt in its ovens.

She was willing to cook her own hand or a plump foot with savory vegetables and bright spices. The thought crossed her mind and coincided with the first step he took that was farther than talk. His bird had drawn him away at dusk through the sleety streets and into the doorway of a pawnshop, whose windows were barred and whose hours and even days of business were erratic. A blue neon sign spelling out clocks and watches pierced the milky darkness, lighting their faces and hands. Her face was in his hands, her hands were on his shoulders, then something was slipped into his pocket, no bigger than an apple but with a solid weight, enough to throw him off.

Where would he put it and where would he keep it and how to explain that everything had to be removed to make room for it? It was without its sock and reptile-skin case. It was wrapped in newspaper and had lost a few of its precious pebbles. This much he knew from touching it, still warm from wherever she had kept it.

With the transfer, a new light was shed on them in the pawnshop doorway. It was full night and the streets had emptied of traffic. This was an old section of the city, abandoned even by night trades. Soon a smoothing hand would remove the last traces of color and commerce, pave it and rebuild on it until its life pulse and quaint appealing rottenness were in the earth and under at least one slab of concrete.

It was a beaded light coming from inside the pawnshop and fanning over their faces, pressed together like two sides of one thing. The transfer was made and every satisfaction gleaned from a steady state of contact. (A handsome room was rented and sand from one globe passed soundlessly into the other.)

And he still had the bird. There was light on both ends of the tunnel.

Home cooking with or without special ingredients was a finite art, but capable of endless cycling. Pots and pans were made to last forever, outspanning generational memory. The arsenal and the arsonist were built to last with guarantees and paperwork to extend the natural lifetime.

Whereas the pawnshop soon closed and covering darkness flourished only in the hollow of the metal bird.

A Full House

The doctor had written five letters to his daughter. They were sealed, but not stamped. They were scattered, not hidden inside his house, a manse dusty with old carpets, bronzes, and pictures. Her mother had died there, lying on the sofa watching cartoons. She wanted to live, but when the oncologists had done what they could do, she was weaned off intravenous platins and left to starve on tablets of morphine. One of the letters was stuffed between the chintz cushions of the sofa.

Her mother's name was Louise. Her ashes were on the mantle, in view of the sofa; but all the cats had been buried in the garden, each with a small headstone. There were fifteen of them, arranged in a circle at the borders of the garden. A letter was found in the garden shed under an old birdhouse.

In the kitchen, where Louise had spent her days circulating under the ring of empty wine bottles lined up in green harmony on the shelf Hubert had built, there was a letter in a bottle of vintage champagne, opened on Patricia's fourteenth birthday. Everyone said it tasted like snow but was yellow as pee.

The fourth letter she found first thing, under her pillow. She had planned to spend the night at home in her old bed and was

upacking her suitcases. At that point, she wasn't aware that letters had been written and tucked away.

Patricia was thirty-five and looked younger. She liked full skirts and cinched waists, white blouses and high-heeled pumps, the New Look. That's what she was wearing. She'd shared this old bedroom with a younger sister, who'd died of the same freak cancer that killed their mother. One year, they were sick together, but Ellen's disease was freakier and moved faster. Now, they were all gone. Her father had thrown himself down an air shaft at the veteran's hospital.

Patricia wasn't surprised to be alone because they were all loners in the big house, spread out, with the sisters and the couple close together only at night. She was alone, but the house was stuffed with everything they'd ever owned, although most of the treasure was the doctor's, a collecting maniac. Even without the letters, and what had followed, Patricia would never be without them.

But, would she live here? She now had four of five letters, but hadn't read one. Five of five was still out there. That he'd have so much to say wasn't a surprise, but the numbering was. He was never that orderly and believed in giving people only a hint of all he had in him. He was a medic but had an archeologist's habits. He liked ruins, a vague part of a large and complicated whole. Why he'd married and had a family was a mystery, or something else the sisters could only guess at with the aid of his psychiatry books. Their father believed in talk, and that even the smallest question could take a lifetime to answer. He could be amusing, if you could stand it, or if you challenged him. They tried, but they couldn't seem to exhaust his knowledge even in one area, nor could they offer up a tidbit he hadn't already savored on his

own. One week, Ellen hated his guts, and the next week, it was Patricia. Their mother never bothered. She paid no attention to what came out of his mouth, only what went into it: the dishes and the wines and the candies. She tolerated his late hours and tucked her own life into what was left, after he finished with his patients, his residents, the books he was writing, and the mark he was making in their small city. She had the house to herself, then, and farmed her daughters out to nursery school, to clubs and lessons, driven around like matching pearls on the velvet of their backseat. He didn't appreciate their company until they began to read, but even their books found their way to his shelves. He preferred books to cats and cats to people. There were usually three or four in residence, strays, and welcome anywhere. He trained them to do tricks no cat did naturally, and they returned the favor by following him like dogs. Patricia sat with her father while his wife and daughter were sick and then dying. She took her mother's place in the kitchen. No one could cook as well as their mother, and no woman was as beautiful: this was his creed, but Patricia knew it only went so far.

By then, his thick hair was gray and his back was curved. She specialized in none of his real passions. Of all the family intimates, the doctor felt least at ease with her, so their meals were over quickly, when father and daughter joined their patients.

After sitting on the bed, listening to the old house tick and groan, amazed to be in command of its bedrooms and dens, music room and salon, sunroom, library, kitchen, attic and basement, porches and porticos, terrace and garden, Patricia went downstairs, letting her bare feet sink into the carpet. In the library was a sturdy table with chairs. Books were stacked on the

table (some had been there for years), double thick on the floor-to-ceiling shelves and on the ladder steps.

When she'd gotten the call from the hospital that her father had fallen, "or jumped," she wondered if he'd run out of reading material. Scanning the ranks of books, she saw what a fortress this material made, solid and dense. They smelled good, too.

And, of course, five of five, was right there under the blotter. He had made it easy, because he knew if he made it too hard, she might not play along. When he challenged her to chess, she'd throw the game if his moves were too deep or too slow. When had he written them? And would they contain something different from the diaries he'd kept in Latin, or whatever language he felt most worthy. The diaries were in his study, along with another collection of books and journals. The house was bulging with messages. You either made the effort they demanded, or they sat there, mute and sulky. She'd left each letter where she found it.

The medical school, the hospital, the clinic, and the arts organizations he'd funded or guided—nothing cultural or medical in the city was left untouched—were each planning a memorial. She had packed two suitcases full of clothes. When she'd written what she had in mind, she would repeat it at each of the ceremonies, but no outfit would be seen twice. She liked clothes. She had a dressmaker she supplied with vintage patterns. The dressmaker loved the New Look, too, and had converted some of her other clients. When Patricia saw a familiar dress made up from modern, shoddy material, she told Margalit that she'd take her business elsewhere if the seamstress shared another personal pattern. (She knew who she sounded like.) She saw a fitted suit with flared skirt at the symphony, and a strapless ball gown at a

charity event, but her town was faddish, and the New Look she'd cultivated soon vanished into consignment shops. This is how time handled pride, a lesson he'd never learned.

Her sister had spent two months languishing in the hospital. Her mother was sick at home, and father was busy, so it was Patricia who came every evening and stayed until the end of visiting hours. The sisters found the hospital environment congenial, even after the staff found out whose daughter Ellen Peirce was. For a week, her private room was cleaned by different people—men, not women—and the head nurse was forever popping her head in the door. Rounds were speeded up and done so early that Ellen was barely awake, unwashed and unfed. Dr. Peirce, though, was a rare visitor and once the staff understood this, things went back to the way they'd been. Their father could pull strings from his office across the street. He understood that his presence might even hurt the best chance his sick child had. The zeal to return the favor to a family that had built the hospital and founded the medical school could kill Ellen, so weak and susceptible. It was different when Louise was an inpatient: she loved the attention. It didn't matter, of course, in the end, because the disease trumped all. Dr. Peirce made it a point of honor that his daughter understand this; she was the one with the brains.

At the time, Patricia was fifteen. She took the bus from the high school and did her homework while Ellen, thirteen, was rolled around for afternoon testing. Then, they waited for the hospital cart to deliver that day's garbage, playing with the things on offer, mixing colors like paint and laughing like hyenas. If Ellen had an appetite, she shared Patricia's hamburger and coke.

They watched TV, Ellen held up flashcards of French verbs, and they read magazines. Both wanted to be actresses, and they pasted together costumes for movies and stage plays. The floor was littered with slippery paper, which the nurses didn't appreciate. Their talent was different, but compatible. Their mother had been an actress, with a few plays on her resumé, but her career was real enough to set a standard for her daughters. Patricia was nice-looking, no beauty, with a coltish body; Ellen had her mother's heart-shaped face. They'd always been allies and were now friends. Schoolmates were told there were no visiting hours. Ellen, forty-five pounds, was on the children's ward.

She spent her days in the playroom, watching the cancer babies fight over the trucks and dolls. She read to them and made the girls wigs—of yellow yarn, like Goldilocks. She tied up the boys' bald heads with pirate scarves. The doctors and nurses wore masks in this room, and the furniture was washable. The sickest kids were rolled in wrapped in blankets, thumbs in their mouths, gaping or groggy. If they made a rumpus, they were wheeled out, so the playroom was quiet. Patricia didn't like it, but it was the second place she checked after sneaking a peek at Ellen's chart.

At nine thirty, the family car would be waiting, and Patricia would be driven home. Roy, the chauffeur, always asked how Ellen was doing. The sisters liked Roy, who lived over their garage, but when he'd been drinking—which was every night of his life, because they visited that room and saw his stash—he was lachrymose (a word the doctor liked to use). Lacrymose—Patricia liked the word, too—was what they didn't need.

When she got home, it was almost time for bed, but she sat for a while with her mother. Louise wasn't lachrymose, but she was prickly and, everyone knew, jealous of the daughter who

was sicker than she was, and of the other one, who was the doctor's intellectual "equal." Louise couldn't believe she had to be this sick, and not the only one sick, so Patricia had to titrate her report on the hospital patient, leaving time to hear the traumas of Louise's long day at home. "Look at me when I speak to you!" she'd insist, when Patricia's eye would stray to the antics of Porky or Felix or Bugs.

The doctor, in his library, was content with the daily report from the attending oncologist. Patricia said good night at the doorway. Then, to the kitchen for the nightly bowl of ice cream. The opening of the freezer was the cue for the cats to enter. Ice cream was their favorite, but Patricia didn't always share.

SHE'D BEEN HOME for several hours, found the letters, stepped into each room—including the cook's attic room, which was empty. Patricia didn't know the name of the last one, a med student, who had shopped and cooked for room and board. Roy was long gone, and so was his girlfriend, the old cook. Her father hadn't had a cat since someone left the door open to the second-floor porch and Clovis had bolted.

The kitchen was stocked. The refrigerator bins stunk of rotten produce, but there were unopened cheeses, fruit, cookies and candy, as well as half a case of wine. Patricia made tea and drank it while flipping through a book of snapshots on the table. Photos were rare in their family. If someone thought to take pictures at a birthday or Christmas, no one remembered to have the film developed. Or if someone ran the film to the drugstore, the pictures were left there. It was their father's brother, a G.P. in the suburbs, who took what pictures they had: in this book, a shot of the sisters playing jump rope with a tuxedo cat looking

on. Was Ellen already sick? Her face had a pearly glow. Here was mother in Victorian dress and half of father in black tie with the all-black cat at his feet; various shots of the house, including through the library window; the bagpipers at their mother's funeral. That was the most recent shot. It looked professional and maybe the newspaper had taken it.

The kitchen was their mother's lair before she retired to the living room couch. She shared the doctor's bedroom, dressing room, and bath. All three were choked with books, and Hubert refused to let the housekeeper dust. *He* dusted them. When, Louise asked Patricia, does he dust them? The doctor was a night owl, Patricia said, and maybe he dusted them then. Her mother laughed. This was what it was like, the laugh said, to be married to an intellectual—like you. Patricia understood that her mother wanted to say more about her marriage, about her life before the sisters had come along. Perhaps she was waiting for Patricia to grow up.

Her father wanted to talk, too, especially when Louise was on bed rest and Ellen in the hospital, but Patricia didn't invite his confidence either. Was she afraid there was even more to know than what she already knew? When Ellen decided, though, to air her version of the family story, Patricia had no choice but to listen. "There's one thing," her sister said, "I want you to do."

"What?" Patricia said. She was now masked and gowned.

Ellen had no air, no strength, so the story was whispered out over several days. Patricia sat close enough to hear.

It turned out that the story told by the dying sister was a good one. Anything at odds with this story was eliminated. It was easy to do because Patricia lived life day by day; she didn't make a story out of anything. The family disasters, as they occurred, were kept separated, one from the other. Ellen was at the end of

a life that had lasted only thirteen years, so maybe that was why she had to make so much more of her story. The need to talk grew as the patient weakened. In the final version, the sisters had the only true marriage. They had shared a small, starter home. They were made of the same organic matter: actressy eggs fertilized by the same doctor.

Patricia laughed, but Ellen was serious and said so. Patricia didn't like to think that the noise, the hateful machinery, plus the excruciating experiments to kill the cancer had warped Ellen's brain, but maybe they had. She had always been strange, but she'd never shared so many ideas. Without cracking open even a fraction of their father's books, they'd learned something from him: that life, especially their life, was worthless without a crazy idea.

During the last days, when even the nurses found the scene unbearable, and the help staff rushed in and out, Patricia decided to stay overnight. A second bed was rolled in, but Patricia slipped in next to Ellen. Her sister was, by then, only a hot needle with a doll's head. Patricia stayed awake, listening to the heaving, whining, and beeping machines and tracing their beads and strings of green and yellow light. Next morning, when the sun woke her up, Ellen was gone.

Patricia's mother lived another month, never knowing her younger daughter was already dead. The doctor had delayed Ellen's memorial to honor mother and daughter, and send them off together.

"I don't know what to say," mourners at the joint service said to the survivors. Then, a second later, they came up with something: "But, at least, you have each other," and with that, their faces brightened.

But starting the day her mother was up on the mantle—her choice—and Ellen, a mile away in the family plot, it was plain that doctor and daughter might have been bound together in sickness and in life, but not in death. By then it was summer, and the dinners were all cooked by Patricia, who used her mother's cookbooks, turning to the wrinkled and stained pages. Hubert still talked, but Patricia offered so little in return (sunk as she was in what a doctor would later call "uncomplicated" grief) that her father's tone went from desperation to fury and then to a needling sarcasm. Although she heard the shifts in tone, nothing really cracked the cone of misery. Patricia gained weight. Her face broke out. She had a cold that lasted through the winter, when it turned into bronchitis. Her vision needed correction, in a family where no one wore glasses. By springtime she had tonsillitis, and the surgery, which was complicated, kept her out of school for weeks, alone, except for visits by Roy and his girlfriend, Clarice. Once a week the doctor entertained his residents at dinner; twice a month the Melville society came for cocktails; monthly there was an executive committee buffet for the Center Club. Seasonal wine and cheese for Friends of the Library, the conductor's circle, the museum board, and the zoo. Clarice was kept busy serving at these parties, while Roy now drove the doctor everywhere. A housekeeper came three times a week. She liked the girl and would have been happy keeping her company, but the house was large and the doctor's standards—now that he entertained so often—were higher than they'd ever been. The woodwork was painted and the upholstery renewed, although the same ancient carpets overlapped on the floor. Patricia spent the days in bathrobe and slippers, trying to keep up with classwork. She settled herself and her books on her mother's couch, with all the cats squeezed in.

PATRICIA HADN'T EATEN since early on the day before. The kitchen still smelled of her mother's, then her own, then Clarice's delicious meals: she could detect ground coffee and roasted meat, curry sauce and caramelized onions. She was now hungry.

But she couldn't move. The first memorial, at the cathedral, was tomorrow morning. She hadn't claimed the body, which lay on ice, awaiting a family decision. (The hospital would wait because of who it was.) The younger Dr. Peirce had referred all such matters to his niece. The brothers had never been close, although Ed, without the talent or drive, had tracked Hubert to medical school, happy to be in his shadow. The younger Peirces were invited for Thanksgiving and sometimes Christmas, but no gifts were exchanged. The sisters went to their uncle's house once or twice a summer to swim in the pool. (Sophie Peirce was a housewife, while Louise Peirce had attended Sarah Lawrence and Juilliard.) The "lesser" Peirces, as Patricia had heard her father say, were childless, so there were no cousins for the sisters.) Uncle Ed said he would attend all the memorials with Sophie, but begged not to be asked to speak. When he called, his voice broke, delivering the news that Patricia had already heard. "I'm so sorry," she said. "I'm the one who's sorry!" he answered, as if rebuked.

Hubert had left a will, but it concerned his charitable bequests, so it was up to the heiress to deal with his body and estate. Would it matter to him if he burned, like Louise, or was buried intact next to his daughter, or maybe he'd like to rest outside with the cats? The dean assumed his colleague would be cremated, and there was a facility, he told Patricia, in the hospital. What was he up to right this minute? Patricia wondered.

He wasn't as far away as that cold slab in the morgue. When he chose to speak, he wouldn't hold back.

With that thought, she jumped up to prepare something to eat. She cracked three eggs, blending them with milk and salt. There was white wine in the fridge and she poured herself a glass. When lunch was ready, she carried it on a tray, as she used to, to the dining room. She laid her dish and glass on the bare face of the table. He liked to garden and his flowerbeds and shrubs were well tended. The wisteria climbing the terrace wall was attracting butterflies. She watched a robin trot across the tiles, hopping over the twigs left from a recent storm. After lunch, and still in her heels and full skirt, Patricia swept the terrace. She put on her father's straw hat. Then, she cleared her dishes and washed them by hand. The kitchen floor needed sweeping, and when that was done, she sat back down.

The doorbell rang for the florist with a box of white roses. Patricia arranged them in a vase and set them near her mother's urn. The afternoon sun poured into the street-side windows, and Patricia decided to take a nap.

But not in her old bed, or on Ellen's either. The twin beds covered in chenille had a musty smell. She found a seersucker bathrobe from high school days. Her father had thrown out nothing, not even the old cat beds, stacked in a dark corner of the upstairs hallway. She threw the robe over her shoulders and went prowling into each room, climbing up to the attic, where Clarice, and then the medical student, had bunked. That bed was stripped and Patricia lay down on the mattress. It had been the doctor's student bed, extra long with a custom-made mattress and box spring, and it was still firm.

The uncomplicated grief was still there, a familiar, even a friend. Her version of the family disease proved chronic, if not

fatal. The deaths, as Ellen had predicted, left Patricia both a widow and an orphan. And he'd also been widowed and orphaned. If the four of them together were less than a normal family, the two left behind had subtracted something else. Patricia closed her eyes but couldn't sleep.

Hungry again, she went downstairs. She unwrapped a wedge of blue cheese and cut open an apple. On the silky fruit slice, tart and juicy, the sharp cheese stung, then melted in her mouth. She ate all of the apple, then spread the cheese on the knife.

When she was full, she entered the library. These were his favorite hours. She'd seen him, under the lamplight, writing or reading, sometimes asleep with his head sunk on folded arms.

Clearing the books away, she sat at the head of the table and hunted through the drawer for his pen. The companion pen, black and expensive, would be waiting for her when she collected his clothes. There was still ink flowing in this one.

Patricia had majored in business and become an executive secretary. In her personnel file, she was called something else and paid as senior management, but she preferred to be seen as an assistant to her boss and as his scribe. They had worked together for ten years and were an integrated machine. She was single and owned an apartment overlooking the city's beautiful bay. Her father thought she'd scanted her real talents—he used stronger words, but her job had taught her how to defuse a harsh phrase and to see it as a reaction or transaction, something that was mostly the property of the sender and could stay there. As he aged, his tongue got sharper, but her policy was not to hang up on him until the timer went off. She gave him fifteen minutes per call, and only reset the timer twice, or at most three times.

He called several times a week. "Why don't you ever call me?" he had asked in a tone she'd never heard before, so she placed the calls herself, right before dinner, when they were both having drinks—although, for Patricia, this was at six o'clock, and for Dr. Peirce, nine. He was getting ready to retire, but instead of cutting back or slowing down, he was working as hard as a first-year resident. He ended all the calls asking her if she was happy. She always said yes.

Patricia sat all night at the table, but all she had to show for it was half a paragraph. She slept two hours on her father's old bed.

Next morning, dressed in a crisp black suit, she arrived at the cathedral with only a few minutes to spare. The celebrant, a bishop, put his arm around her shoulder, outlining the stages of the ceremony and who was assigned to do what: her eulogy would come last. The first row was reserved for the immediate family with Miss Peirce on the aisle. Behind the family would be the medical community and city government; in the last reserved seats, the university faculty, the Melvilleans, the Hawthorne Club, and the citizenry. It'll be a full house, he said. Bishop Brown knew Hubert well and offered his sincere condolences. It was the right decision, he said, to delay the autopsy, so that they could celebrate the life in its fullness without reference to its end.

As next of kin, he said, Patricia should be the one to bear the offerings, the loaf of bread and chalice of wine. The ceremony would open with the requiem chant, followed by the recession to the rear of the nave for the blessing of the gifts. She would then carry the gifts on a tray right behind the celebrant and acolytes. Patricia surprised the priest by declining the offer. She didn't feel up to it, she told him: it would take everything

she had to speak her part. The bishop was sorry to hear it, but he would defer to her wish. When the offertory came, and all rose, Patricia watched the dean of the medical school carry the tray to the altar. As he passed the family pew, he bowed his head and lowered his eyes.

The praise showered on the deceased by colleagues, staff and students, the medical dean, university president, and others was abundant and even heartfelt. Much of it was true: he *was* a generalist in an age of narrow specialties; he had been lavish with his time and money, he did build the "periodic table" of neuroses—at first, as a joke, but it had proved useful. He was an educator, superb clinician, gifted administrator, husband, father, bibliophile, collector, connoisseur, philanthropist.

It was a hot day, and the church was smoky from the censing. Communicants received the holy bread in their hands and drank wine from a cup, whose golden rim was polished after each sip. There was a stack of clean napkins on the altar rail and a basket of discards. Patricia was drowsing but roused herself to let Ed and Sophie pass and then return, chewing, with downcast eyes. She watched all the doctors file up in pairs, then the mayor and city officials, the police and firemen in uniform, and the literary societies. The altar boys replenished the hosts and wine and supplied fresh napkins. Extra priests were stationed at the side aisles.

During the interval, Patricia retrieved the letters from her purse, which she opened in the warm calm of the church, with the murmur of shuffling feet. The first was typed. It was a list of epigrams on art—it started with a dry line from Aristotle and ended with a flourish by Pater. She had heard all of these famous lines, and more, at their dining room table. They were old friends. She closed her eyes and she could hear his voice.

Number two contained a celluloid slide, which she held up to the light. In it the unconscious (UCS) swam up from the groin, like a ferocious devil, to whisper into the ear. Patricia laughed to see it again.

The third was a maze sketched by a shaky hand with a bull in the center and a string broken halfway through the circuits. Printed on the side was a reduction of logic's familiar nubbin: that if man is mortal, he must die. The fourth letter was a long string of their names—Hubert Edgar, Louise Ruth, Patricia Louise, Ellen Ruth—shuffled in all their combinations until, at the tail end, each lined up with itself and stopped.

And here, finally, was the last: "Dearest Daughter," it read in his slanting hand.

> If you sum up your judgment of me, the result you get is that, although you don't charge me with anything downright improper or wicked, you do charge me with coldness, estrangement, and ingratitude. And, what is more, you charge me with it in such a way as to make it seem my fault, as though I might have been able, with something like a touch of the steering wheel, to make everything quite different, while you aren't the slightest to blame, unless it be for having been too good to me.

It was quote for which she would spend the rest of the day seeking its source. It was not his style, but it was faintly familiar and not unlike him in its twisting, destructive logic. Perhaps it was a test.

But the closing prayer was now being read, instructing the living to turn their back on the dead. Patricia rose from the pew and walked the few steps to the altar.

This page intentionally left blank

The Wedding Gowns

[1]

It was too late to order one, but Greg told Mary that a real marriage was better off starting at zero.

"We're having a wedding," she said. "Is that zero?"

"We're having a wedding, yes," he said, "but there are no bridesmaids, and the cake is organic."

Mary had forgotten about the cake with its collection of indigestible grains and grasses, uncured sugars and free from color, too, even the color white. Organic was never white; it was always brown, gray, tan, gray-green. Even the fruit was flawed and grim. She was thinking so hard about the cake that her face drained of what little color it had, and the sweetness went with it, and Greg wondered where it went, when it went so fast. He could almost see through her head. Was Mary basically a colorless girl?

Everything with Mary was half and half, point and counterpoint: she could see all sides of most questions, and that in itself removed color from their debates, which were always one-sided—whichever side Greg took. He was tired of playing games, picking a side just to flaunt it, or for the rise—since the rise was

negligible and snuffed so quickly, it took her breath away, and she'd be tired for the rest of the evening. Mary was a conflict-free zone, but so tense that one time, seeing the suppressive effort and the grimace that went with it, Greg burst into tears, a first, since his mother had dropped him off first day in kindergarten in 1961.

But she wasn't a Stepford wife or bride-to-be. She had no such positive format. Her one law was to give in. "Even I," he'd said, the day he proposed, "don't need you to go that far. Maybe some men would," he said, then winced. "Other men you've known, I mean. True?"

At the sound of that magic phrase, Mary's small color returned. She reviewed the parade of male holograms and was ready to do a roll-call in her head, when Greg insisted she answer the question, or forget the whole business.

"Yes," she said.

"Thanks," he said. "Shall we shake on it?"

But she laughed at this, and they kissed until all surface tension melted into drive. "Why I love her, let me count the ways." There was this one that rose out of the wilderness, a clear figure on a tower like Simon of the desert.

But the approaching day, 7th of November, wrought a change. Something was hammering the smooth surface, but what or who? And what was under that fake veneer?

Mary was a girl who had rid herself of extras. She had just enough clothes and enough room in her apartment and bedclothes that were warm enough and slippers for her feet, but nothing more. She liked animals but had just one old cat, a bastard with stinky turds, sharp claws, and an air of authority that Mary did nothing to challenge. She didn't indulge the cat (Greg

couldn't remember its name; it had two names, hyphenated), except in according it that hypertrophied degree of personal liberty, that rare atmosphere that Greg enjoyed, too, of friction-free living. The cat was slate gray and dour, as if late-day, ailing Nietzsche had been reborn in its fur hide. Greg despised it and refused to acknowledge its place in Mary's stripped-down life, but you had to count it in somewhere. It certainly counted itself in.

Beyond the dubious luxury of keeping this unrewarding animal in feed and litter and space on the bed, and in the bathroom where it drank its water and laid a track of muddy paws disgusting to see on an empty stomach, Mary gave not one inch or one dollar to appeasements, sweetnesses, or refreshments of the spirit. She kept a lot of books, but even these were just printed matter; as objects, they had no allurements, and they were read and re-read, exhausted and peeled of life.

"You are truly the X," he said to her, on first seeing her dwelling. "X marks the spot," he went on, "and X the unknown."

Why was he there? The X had something to do with it, and it still did.

But here they were in October, and talk began of a wedding gown from a gal who had never even had a beautiful dress. He knew because—loving women's clothes as he did—he had slipped through the hangers in her closet and made a mental note: Claudine, his ex, wouldn't have shucked these rags and stuffs on her lowest-rung consignment. There was something wrong with every piece, and sometimes more than one thing. It was fascinating, and, truth to tell, he wished he could have discussed it with Claudine. She would have a remark and a pigeonhole, but that would not affect his feeling for Mary. Mary

was Mary, and Mary's clothes were Mary's clothes. Everything about Mary was pure Mary. Claudine could carp and bait and mock and titter, but Mary as Mary remained untouched.

Could Claudine, he wondered, enter the fray now? Now that Mary was brooding on the subject of wedding gowns for their November wedding? After a lifetime of self-abnegation? Did he want any help from Claudine after the kicks in the chest, the batterings and insults and abrasion? Claudine was the opposite of conflict-free, and Greg had had his fill of that kind of hurtful color. Still, he wondered: if Mary wanted a wedding dress, and Claudine intervened—?

They were having dinner at a Spanish restaurant when the question of a gown and a zero-start marriage had distracted them from the "vomity" food, as Mary called anything pureed or too creamy and wet, greasy, nutty, mealy, or puffed. She liked food that had a clear, single-strand flavor. Her favorites were dark bread, pickles, radishes, clear soup, and thick-crust pizza with tomato sauce only. At Spanish, French, Italian, near-, middle-, and far-Eastern restaurants, Mary ate the bread (if it was a wheat culture) or rice (if it wasn't), lots of sake, acidy white wine, hoppy American beer, and coffee. She was rail-thin with the face of Sienese madonna, and hair as black and slick as a seal's. Her eyes were big and always half-closed, as if sheltering behind them another life.

She was drawing on a napkin. At first, Greg saw a bird—heron or flamingo—and then he saw what had to be the dress. She had it down in outline but continued to fuss: cross-hatchings for the shadow it cast on the raised platform and rays for the parts (beads or paillettes) that sparkled. That much he followed, but now she was doing front and back views and, on a whole,

unfolded napkin, different sets of sleeves. When had she learned to draw? Greg had never seen so much as a single fashion magazine in her apartment, and in check-out lines, she meditated or forced him to tell or re-tell elaborate family stories, stories so valuable to him and so pleasurable in the telling that he didn't mind the eye-lock she put on him. Suffice to say, she studied in those minutes no magazine covers.

The dresses were luscious. You could read the fabric—the silk, the silk velvet, the shantung, crepe de chine, and peau de soie—from the featherings and rays and strokings. They were a miracle of taste and made for a body like Mary's—slim yet shapely with skin so soft it felt furred or watered. That was reason number two, he thought, nodding his head as if Claudine were right there, pressing him for answers, or laughing in his face.

Mary folded the napkins and slipped them—quite a handful: the bar's stock was depleted—into her purse, then smiled at Greg as if meeting him for the first time.

"If we added," he said, stroking her long, ogival back, "one or even two months to our date, you might have time—." His face brightened. He could feel it glisten with sweat. His voice rose and thinned. Was he afraid? He checked his pockets. The wallet was there, the keys and the small change he always carried. By averting his gaze, he caught his breath.

She was talking in that thoughtful, unabrasive way, full of consideration for deeper feelings, or thoughts unuttered, perhaps still unknown. The girlish voice cascaded over his face. It tended to make him forgetful, looser in his causal links, happier in the way two drinks will sand away the day's rust.

"Gowns," he said, "wedding dresses."

"It's not that important," she said.

"Maybe it is," he said.

"Maybe," she said. "But for now, let's forget it, as I can see it upsets you."

"Not that much."

"We'll see," she said.

The slop was laid out before them at a round table, and he could see how it could be seen as that: green resiny pool, red mud with toy soldiers, orange scum, and bread like a wad of blueprints. Was this what a new marriage would wreak from the half-formed traits and bents and elasticities of habit? He had become Claudine inside and out and, once saturated, he'd gone out on the chase. A couple of years later, Claudine had become a different Claudine: older and snakier. He was still the young Claudine, and attached to him were women—a handful—attracted to that and to his now-mature masculinity. He knew it and they knew it, but the Claudine part was hidden—grasped but not named. There was a yumminess embedded in his clothes, his words, his liking for certain pictures and kinds of music, the way he walked, and, most of all, how he saw Claudine in them and drew her out of them so long as the rich illusion held.

Once Claudine was whisked from his life into another man's, Greg reduced and became neither what he'd been before nor after his first marriage. There was scarcely a residue or rime of Claudine when Mary floated into his life.

If Claudine was the sun, Mary was the moon. And he was ready for it. Age had dimmed his headlights and it felt good, and Mary's accommodating ways sheltered him like a spacious, light-weight tent: there, but hardly. What did marriage mean to a weightless moon? She might have said no, why bother. She'd said yes, okay, why not, and even settled on a wintry date (Claudine had been a dog-day bride), and the words "nothing special"

prepared him for how his new bride pictured the event. It was a forecast that chimed with the rest of what others might call a simple life, but Greg knew better. He was not, he reminded himself, staring into the opaque Spanish pools, looking for simple.

Dinner was unbroken silence. The Sienese sampled the slop, a smidge of this, a spot of that. Greg was weltered in doubt. The gowns *were* troubling. The subtle sweep rustled in his ears, and it was both arousing and scary. How real they had become. There were four, weren't there, when you assembled the fore and aft and fitted in the sleeves? No headpiece or veil had been drafted. No models filled the dresses, yet they weren't entirely flat. Greg was giddy with excitement.

He took the dresses home. It was the night he spent chez Mary, although he preferred his own place with its high-stacked bed and clean, velvety carpets, the lotions and liquids and stingers and soaps he kept stored in his bathroom—some he had bought for Mary. Did she use them? Detectable on that alpaca skin (he thought), might be a curl of smoky scent, but when he asked, "My skin hydates itself," she'd said. "I don't need the products." But hearing, she corrected. "I appreciate the offer and the outlay." And with that, she kissed the round rim of his face and licked his eyelids.

He didn't want to lose a gather or a pleat. As they lay on her futon mattress and he counted, under his back, the slats of the wooden frame, and after Mary had offered him everything contained in her outline, pretty and clear and pear-shaped as a Van Eyck Eve, he brought out the dresses and arrayed them on the ceiling of her box-like bedroom.

Four was a mistake. There were five. One was ivory, one snow, one tea-stained, one blush, one pearl. There were fabrics matte and shiny, silky and stiff, ribbed and piped, panned and

brocaded; overlays and underskirts, hoops, bones, wires, and ribs. In each he placed his paper doll and fell asleep folding tabs on shoulders, waist, neck, and arms.

All the brides were flat, black-haired, and with a Sienese green-gessoed complexion. They spent the night on the ceiling of Greg's amorous dream.

By morning, instead of extending the date of their wedding-to-be, he wanted to foreclose on it, shorten the gap between it and now. Mary brewed coffee in her dime-store percolator. It was good coffee, but not right for the age. She set the pot on a trivet. They ate white-bread toast with Welch's jelly and untinted, unsalted butter.

"The hell with bargains. Let's get the dress!" he said, balling the toast in his mouth before he spat it into the napkin.

"Which one?' she asked, still in her sleep suit.

"I don't know yet," he said. "But it's a project we can work on together."

"How?"

"Did you keep the cartoons?"

"The what?"

"The dummies you made on napkins."

His Mary blushed—was it possible?—to the roots of her Chinese hair. She put her face in her hands. Was she crying?

The pretty, olive face was all fiery and blotched, seeded with tears. The tears dropped to her jawbone, and he caught one in the crook of his finger and sucked it.

"This is who we are," said Mary, making circles with her hand of the room, the table, his face and hers. "Why push?"

He was emboldened by her retreat into the plainness of her life—but not yet his—to fetch her purse and mine it of the napkins.

"I've done some work on these," he said.

"Go on," she said.

"Well," he said, "I put the best of all five designs into one dress. It's hanging up on the ceiling. What I mean is," he corrected, covering a thin hand with both of his, "it's in my head—the perfect version."

"Let's change the subject," said Mary, looking away.

"Don't you want to see it?"

"If you think it's good, I'm sure I'll like it."

"No. It's your dress, your idea. You're the bride. And Mary," he added, "it's your first wedding. You have all the picks. It's only right." He wanted to talk and keep talking to fill the gap opening between them, and why? Why? When, in his life, he'd never felt so close to anyone before. They were merging, and without the sting and snap of his harsh adhesion to Claudine. It was smooth, life-like, one surface yielding to another, or folding inward without a crease or ripple. "Darling," he said, "what's wrong?"

Mary was making a ball of the napkins and rolling it on the table for compaction.

"Why are you hurting me?" he said. "And hurting yourself?"

"You don't understand the first thing," she said, putting the ball in the pocket of her robe, "about marriage."

"I don't?"

"Each person's work life is separate. That's the beauty of it. The more separate, the better."

"Is that," he said, pointing to the pocket "your work?"

"Not anymore. First, you change my life and bring me to the point of designing five wedding gowns on paper napkins, then you—without asking me—destroy their integrity in the making of one of your own gowns, something fit for the queen of your

last marriage. And suck the air," she added, turning the lid on the grape jelly until it squeaked, "right out of my lungs."

"Did I ruin it?"

"See this?" she said, fingering the ball in her pocket.

"Yes?"

"Now I have to start all over again. And with nothing—since I've used up all my ideas."

This could not be allowed to stand. Greg had fallen in love with his gown *and* the five ingredient gowns. They meant something and *it* meant everything, and his marriage must go forward and accumulate everything it could along the way. Now he was in love, and soon he would be more so. No organic cake either, but he would deliver the bad news bit by bit.

[2]

When Greg went to work that day—first, home for a change of clothes and a decent shower—Mary took out the ironing board and rolled out the ball of dresses on paper, treating each napkin to the pressure of a warm iron. The ink ran a little so that the designs reversed onto the ironing-board cover, a rough flour sack. Now she had two versions of each pattern, and ten right sleeves. Gloves would be nice, if a bit old-fashioned, and each sleeve length required a different hand treatment. There were stockings and footwear to think of, and the question of the headpiece and veil. There wasn't enough paper in the house for the requisite sketches, so Mary drove the "bucket of bolts," her brother's hand-me-down car, to the Dime-Mart for an extra-large roll of shelf paper. She knew all the help and the owner and the gal at the cash register. When she also picked out a packet of magic markers, they threw that in for free. She went back for a cardboard of tacks and corkboard and ended up writ-

ing a check for ninety-five dollars, purchasing a used drafting table and stool, a compass, tape measure, ruler, a calculator, and then went back again for a bolt of cotton fabric, straight pins, dressmaker's chalk, and was on the verge of buying a second-hand sewing machine when the noon whistle blew, recalling her to the day, the hour, and the shrinking span between now and when his office released Greg and he would likely make a beeline for the apartment, or call and have her meet him at Charlie's Spouter Inn, where they drank their cocktails.

It took three trips to get all the stuff into the back seat and trunk of the bucket. Mary drove home extra slow, dodging potholes and sandy shoulders. She dragged the materials in two huge bundles up the two flights of stairs and threw it inside the door. What a mess it made; the shelf paper unrolling and attracting Tiberius-Caesar to the site. He lay down on the paper carpet and cleaned his right front tire.

Mary left the stuff on the floor and brewed a large percolator of coffee. She cut free of Tiberius's carpet and took the roll into the kitchen. First she taped all the "cartoons," as Gregory had called them, to the refrigerator door, then sat at the table with the scroll and tried to imagine what marriage to a once-married man would be like. There'd be shadows, echoes, and doubles. That would demand, she figured, a hoop or series of hoops, with the largest circumference around the feet. The air cone within would be a free zone, and maybe proper to wear nothing under the hoops. The hoops would be ribbon-wrapped wire. And that makes me, she said out loud, and Tiberius heard it, the wire mother. Claudine, the clothes horse, was the cloth mother. But over the air cone, protected by wire hoops, would go a sumptuous fabric cover. What? She wracked her brain while coffee boiled over on the stove.

She poured out a mug of burnt coffee, sweetened with four sugar lumps and half and half for Tiberius and a teacup of same with skim and an envelope of saccharine for herself. Tiberius had his coffee on the stove. Mary ran the cold-water tap so he could refresh himself. The sugar donuts were gone, so she shared an Oreo with Ti, taking the top black half and leaving him the middle and bottom.

The bodice of the dress was critical. It must be skin-tight with a high tube neck and sleeves that came to a point on the back of the hand, with a loop over the middle finger. While she sketched these points, it occurred to Mary that this new fashion bore no resemblance to the five starters.

What do I want to look like, she said aloud, to my bridegroom? On the day of his second wedding? So far, so good: hoop skirt, tight, long-sleeved, high-necked shirtwaist. Yes, it would have buttons going from chin to waist, a button every quarter inch. She drew the buttons. Would they function or just decorate? Function, she said out loud, and by then, Tiberius was part of the conversation. He matched the length of Mary's strings of speech with his own, more mellifluous reverbs. Then he jumped to the table and sat on the still-damp drawing. His tail was on it, feathering the skirt and—if that weren't too extravagant—a skirt of feathers over the wire integument would be perfect, but few feathers were white, long, and plumey enough for the job of covering the cone. She needed something through which no hardness would show, but feathers were too costly. It was coming along, and now the November date seemed timely—enough time, but not too much. What's the half-life of passion? she asked herself. Perhaps it had already elapsed. Hence, she said out loud, the need for a gown.

By four o'clock that afternoon there were forty gowns, each a

variation of the requisite rigids, smooths, and flexions. She had reviewed hats, crowns, flowers, veils, garters, flats, high-buttoned boots, muffs, capes, and trains. The outer layer was to be gauze, an organdy-like translucent icing.

The cat was asleep, but twitching from the caffeine and sucrose. He was under the table, draped in crude cotton, and Mary was resting her bare feet on his furry back when Greg walked in the door with a huge box tied with a white ribbon and bow the size of a watermelon.

"Here it is," he said, "and I might add, like Spiro Agnew, 'love it or leave it.'"

Mary laughed. They were in an easier place now and what, for God's sake, was it all about anyway? What could be so important to test the strength of their bond?

He tried to place the big box on the table, but there was no space. He tried to slide it under the table, but the cat was there. He put it on his lap, but it was too bulky. There was only the bed or the floor, and this box was not going on Mary's kitchen floor. "It's clean," she said, reading his mind.

"Even," he said, "if you went down on your hands and knees every single day with a box of Oxydol or Borax, this floor would never be clean."

Mary looked at the floor, a linoleum, but chopped and bitten and grooved by a long service in an overused part of a never-vacant apartment where students and old people and young professionals had been too hard on it. She loved the linoleum and didn't scrub it too often or too hard because too fragile. It was a domestic ruin, full of history, beaten down by life.

"Okay, don't," she said.

"Are you curious?"

"Sure," she said. "Open it up."

"What's all this?" he said, "and all that?" pointing to the living room where the rest of the Dime-Mart merchandise lay sprawled in the entry.

"It's related," she said, "to that," pointing to the big box, "but it's an earlier stage."

"Drawings?" he said, pointing to the wads of inked paper under her elbows.

"Yup."

"Any you want to show me?" he said.

"Are you still interested?"

"Well," he said, "first things first. Open the box. Test the real."

Mary opened her arms, so thin and perfectly shaped and exactly the color of a young onion.

"Here," he said. "I love you and I want you to wear this as my bride."

She met his eyes with hers. She reached over the box to take his hands and they held hands over the slippery skin of the box. "And I love you," she said, with an elbow that dislodged Tiberius from the sides of the box, where he struggled to plant his claws.

"Thank you for that," he said. "Just in case I have to bring it back."

Mary took her hands back. "There's the provisional note," she said.

"What?"

"The 'just-in-case.'"

"Well, what if you don't like it?"

"One thing leads to another," she said. "And everything unravels."

"Love is fragile you think—," he said, "a love like ours?"

"Sometimes," she said, taking the box on her lap, "a question

will make it fragile. It introduces," she said, untying the bow, sumptuous, silvery, stiffened silk with a glittery edge, "uncertainty, which everyone contains like a virus. But two people!"

"Open it. Let's see."

She opened, and unpapered and lifted and shook. She stood and let the dress fall from her shoulders. It was the color of the sheen on a black pearl and just as weightless. Its shimmer rayed outward to create a set of lunar rings, a dress with an aura, a shadowy shell. It was full-length, long-sleeved, pale gray Chinese silk. A subtle watermark appeared like a seal or stamp here and there, on one sleeve, at the waist and hem, on the shoulder.

"Now you're everything you've always denied yourself. Will you kill me, Mary, if I say that?" he pleaded, embracing his girl with his arms and the half moon of the dress.

The Siamese person, using the dress as a screen (with Greg's hands as clothespins), stripped out of her day's rags and shivered into its chill ink. When her head popped through the simple hole of a neckline, it flattened the Chinese-black hair to a set of brush strokes. The pearl sheen corrected the green gesso to the meat of a white cherry.

"Open your eyes," said Greg.

She did and saw the silk pooling at her feet. The flat was the color of tears, the folds, a November rain. Greg handed her the sash—color of the fold. He turned her round and tied it in back.

"You have everything you used to have, and now you have this," he said quietly, and Mary seemed to be feeding on his words, first tasting them. It was a new kind of food.

"A gray bride?" she said. "And all there is of me is me?"

He nodded.

"It's strange," she said. "More like a skin than a coating."

[3]

IT TOOK A WHOLE HOUR on a free Saturday to clear the apartment of the art and sewing material. Mary did not save, recycle, or return, even though stuff was still in its plastic with price tags. The shelf paper made a nice door-to-door carpet for Tiberius, so let him have it. The dress was hung from a ceiling hook in the bedroom. The light shone through it, and you could see a map with certain scenes and near-scenes. The Chinese-silk warp with watermarks suggested an ink-wash landscape. Poet by a stream in the winter mountain. "Give me a chance," Mary had told Greg, "to think about what goes with it," but already she knew that Claudius Caesar would supply the accoutrements, as she had the dress, which was from a costume house. It was a priestess's chamber gown. That's what the literature said. Mary found the literature in the pocket of Greg's raincoat, the one he left in the closet because the weather had turned so mild. Claudius had, perhaps, written a check? The bill for four hundred and fifty dollars was marked paid. The box was from Mano Schwartz, a fur shop and special occasion, but that was a dodge.

Mary brushed her cheek against the silk of the gown and let its fly weight float and tickle. How could a dress meant to house the body on such a crucial day have so little will to exert, or fell weight to stabilize? Mary left the dress to shiver in the breeze. She led Tiberius, who tracked her like a dog, to the shoebox where, under the stacks of ordinary photos, was the purloined and secreted shot of the first wedding.

Mary allowed herself a glimpse of this shiny square once every two months. Any more and the image would carve an outline on her corneas, a crosshair to reality. Any fewer and she'd

begin to forget it and to lose all the thick backing that came with a mature man.

She switched on the light, creating a golden flower at the heart of the photo. The gleam in the otherwise darkened room was like a specimen under glass. Now there were two layers: the flame that dazzled the surface, and the wedding beneath it. Tilting the photo rolled the flower of light around the wedding.

Mary was not in this picture. Not in the corners scarred by the whisked-off tape, not among the heads that rolled out from under the slippery flower. Not coming up from underneath, like a serpent in the grass.

Was there something in the photo that predicted her arrival? Moving the light flower, she measured the angle between the freshly wedded couple, whose touching sides formed—yes—a sloppy, obtuse angle. Next to the bridegroom and looming close was his mother. Mother and son were in parallel, as were the bride and her father, parallel but not touching. Closer to their share of the couple than was spouse to spouse. The obtuse triangle, dead center, was where Mary—with a different personality—could fit herself. Actually, there was room there for three of her kind. There was also a bachelor brother with a wide space between his black-and-white costume and the baby brother, a squirt, next to him. That was the logical space, no? Was the bachelor's name Angelo, or was it just a joke name?

All of this was icing on the cake. Mary's eyes iced with tears both hopeful and sad.

No place for me here, and no invitation either, or memory. So she was free, and felt free, to undress the bride and try hers on, the only suitable dress and the best one.

Family Romance

Veena woke in the dark to plan her fiftieth birthday. Her father wouldn't be around for very long and he'd enjoy something set aside for his child ballerina. Her shoes hung by their ribbons in his bedroom, in different sizes, pink, white, black, and midnight blue. There were posters, programs, and newspaper write-ups mounted in numbered albums. A birthday party in pinks and grays with cake and ice cream for just the two of them would suit to a T. Veena struggled to breathe the night air all flowery and dusty with springtime effluvia. She had her sensitivities from him. Even her cream-coated skin suffered in springtime, as if the trees in their fresh robes and the smart yellow grasses wanted to inflict on her a portion of their lot—to be clipped, trimmed, sawed, burned, and slivered. Try not to think of it that way, she told herself, lying in bed in a watered silk gown. Her gown was printed with big black flowers whose floppy or folded petals were just visible in the starlight. She still favored the luster of silk and the narrow spectrum of ballet dyes. Thinking about her father, now when his days were numbered—but, before that, too—was her favorite nighttime hobby, better than knitting, reading, or crochet work. Better than laying out the

jewels other men had given her in the course of her lavish and somewhat late female flowering. For each of these "friends" she had named a colored stone, so there were opals, garnets, aquamarines, corals, and amethysts. Only her dad was allowed the precision and authority of diamond white. Some day—and that day was coming—these cold mementoes would be strung together into a single noose, which was why there was time to set them aside and plan the party.

Veena spread her thin arms out so a hand was free to clasp the edges of the bed, there where the roll was, the cloth cable that lashed the four clean sides of the double mattress. Squeeze it, and she did. Her arms were still ballet arms, but not her legs (don't talk about them); the waist was equal to the span of two large male hands, but the shoulders were padded with the dainty fat of post-meridial femininity. The white neck was a puerile stem and the head a cabbage rose—face, hair, and rings of glorious health, now invaded by winged flecks of pollen. She was half one thing and half another, but to keep from rocking or screaming or flying, she gripped the sides of the bed.

Her dad was eighty-four and all gleaming white: head, face, suit, and silver ties. His old wife, Veena's mother, had pared him down to this color, starting from charcoal gray and navy blue and filtering him through the pastels of the seventies with leisure jackets and matching pants, shirtless and free. Mother was gone, having bled him of time and other opportunities and left him white as a ghost, with one family member and one job: passing the basket in and out of the aisles for the Sunday High Mass. Veena had kicked this habit, although she helped him, with her electric calculator, to work through the weekly offerings and hand the priest a paper with its sum tidy and to the penny true. The fathers locked him into the counting room

under their house and closed the shades to make sure none of their take dwindled away. He came to Veena's right after, reeking of metal and paste, with his old fingers inky and stiff, to be smoothed out by Veena with a tall cool one in a glass with a sweater, and a tub of salt peanuts.

Her mother had named her Maureen, but the dancer stretched the new name over her head and shoulders and tugged it down over the hips to her strong feet. Veena Darcy was prima with the state ballet from seventh grade to the terminus of her career at thirty-nine, wearing the same size leotard and pliant tights. She was Odette/Odile and the Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella and the Sugar Plum Fairy. She had the longest neck in the business and the purest form, legs and liquid arms and small doll head. Dad licked all the reviews and notices, programs and playbills in place in his numbered albums, locked away and safe in the home vault kept under his bed. He loved to see his Veena dance.

"Miss Darcy," her pupils called her, "Miss Darcy, please," as she illustrated the ancient codes fluidly, and for their sake, before the wall of mirrors. Flight was her ideal, not just the pinwheel struts and one-legged stabs, but dance was not going there and the higher academies failed to see in the noble experiment a worthwhile course, so Miss Darcy stayed where she was, a provincial lily or rose—or crab grass, she hissed, grabbing the cable that squeezed her mattress.

Her career was over, the less-than-first-class jewels were in their coffers, and these feet, so preternaturally strong and eternally arched, had walked the earth for half a century. How did she walk? Like a horse or a cat? Like a horse, because the weight of her solid mass fell on a horseshoe, just the outer edges of

the foot and the heel—the toes were reserved for their specialty; like a cat, because the footfalls were nested in their own cloud of downy silence. She liked to keep these feet off the ground, in the air, where they belonged. And pain—stabs and streaks, frictions and drumming—was a new partner, waiting in the gravitied space of the home, the driveway, the grocery. Her body contained the history of its dances.

The snowflake light of stars falling on the flowery negligee led to dreams and the long-fingered hands loosed their hold on the bed cable. Veena finished her sleep on her back, while the year turned its circle from forty-nine to the bright, half-moon decade.

Her dad was on the doorstep ringing the bell, peeking in the window, rubbing the soles of his bucks on the hairy doormat. In his hands were the pink and white cake and a box of candles, favors, a packet of balloons, and the games. It was too early, so Veena, peering at him through a slat in the Venetian blind, cursed and groaned.

He heard it. For him, there was just the two of them in the world and every day was a birthday, so this day, more special than special, had him on pins and needles with a bellyful of butterflies. He hadn't slept; he'd ironed his cream-colored slacks over and over till the crease fell like a plumb line. He wanted every minute of this glorious day to be one of a kind with an arrow of pure merit, integer upon integer into infinity. A lifetime of optimism in the face of incurving frustration made him hope that his joy would kindle something in his defoliating bloom of a daughter.

"You always jump the gun," Veena said, opening the door.

"But sit down and have some coffee. Put that stuff down, or take it back to the car." She pointed to his vehicle, all curves and all white, washed and waxed for the day.

They drank their coffee and split a muffin while Veena told her dad to deliver the cake and extras to the old-folks' home. She had outgrown that kind of party and had plans of her own for him and her. And "don't even say it," she said, putting a finger on her lips, and then on his, "until it's time."

But it was already out of his mouth. "Happy birthday, baby girl."

"Thank you. Now go home and I'll call you when everything is ready."

You buffoon, she said to his back.

Once he was gone, she rolled on her stockings and a lacy dress with beautiful bone-leather shoes and tied her thick black hair, all coiled with natural curls and waves, into a low-hung tail, well-secured with a clip made of horn.

In the marketplace, she hired a car and driver and reserved a table by the sea on the foremost point of land, just room for a prow and a lantern. She had a costumer deliver to her father's house a naval uniform in summer white, and would herself wear her mother's wedding dress, a fringy thing of tea-colored silk brocade, heavy with facings and scrims, beadings and panels. It had been seasoning for years in a sea chest of cedar. It was more than she'd expected or dreamed of, and she was happy to see it taking place while her dad was still alive.

He'd never been disappointed with provincial. For him, a stage was a stage, if his Veena were on it with her plumes and stalky legs. His ambition for her never exceeded the actual, and this was fine when she was a brainless child. Making up for his fatuous satisfactions were her mother's unnatural demands.

Veena/Maureen was twice as thin, obscenely acrobatic, trilingual, and with uncut hair down to her knees, and still her fortunes as a girl dancer did not fructify. Overdone and overbroad, monkey-like and serpentine—these were the remarks made in the penny-press reviews. The excessiveness hurt the eyes and compromised the music. Her mother's ardent hopes and fierce discipline had prepared her for flight, and dance was still the clap of wooden-soled slippers on a resonant floor.

Overdone and overfull, overlong and pointed like the hands of a clock: this was not dance, so Veena (now only Veena) broke it down, all the hard-corned steps and stretches. She started once again at zero, but no time in the body's treacherous dash to the finish line to found a new gestural vocabulary. It was only half-formed, imperfect, brittle, when age starched the tendons stiff and jiggered the joints. By then, Veena's mom was sealed up in her tomb, with a dance program signed by Dame Margot at the launch of the five-year-old daughter's ordeal. Mother and daughter had sat agape, their hearts twined, at the white dazzlement and deafening racket. Both sides of the problem were there at the outset: the flight and the farce; lightness and pigs on wood.

When she got home, Veena made herself a roast beef sandwich and let the meat scent the forbidden bread, then ate the bread lavished with richest egg mayonnaise, saving the beef for the meat pie she made weekly for her dad. She tidied her house and sat on the sun porch watching the birds in their house and on the boat they swung from, filled by Veena with seeds and suet. She was sewing a piece of cloth with so light a thread that the hummingbirds eyed it as nest filament, but no way were they getting the precious silk, fine as baby hair. Veena was embroider-

ing the hankie to cover her father's face when he died in her arms. The pennies for his eyes and the gold needle for his heart were in the lockbox with the birth certificates and one death certificate. The hankie was triple bleached Irish linen and the thread was whiter still. A dancer's hand is not made for sewing, so the stitches were a childish cobble. She had used a fine-lead pencil to sketch in the letters for Daddy. Sew, sew, sew, and finally the sun went down and it was time to dress.

But when he arrived, the beast, he wore his seersucker suit and black weejuns, a bouquet in his hand of white roses in clear plastic. Veena faced him through the door's diamond-shaped window, making a face of such contracted rage that the nose alone cleared the red mass of tissue folds. "Damn it to hell!" he heard and the tension drained from his body and his suit. He could feel his socks in limp rings around his ankles. What had gone wrong?

It was then that, door flung open, he saw Miss Marie, the bride of his youth with a cat head on. What might have made him cry made him laugh out loud. Who did she think she was?

They stood there in the dusky doorway with the door flung open, stopping to register every change in the slippery slope of recognition, eye and eye and fingers gathered in fists. "Where's the goddamn suit?" she said.

"What suit?"

"Sailor," she said, "the one I sent for my birthday," and it was as if she were speaking a fresh new language, no part of which he understood. He had his suit: he was wearing it, and yes it was white, but there was a thin, faded blue stripe that you could see, if you looked hard.

Veena—for it was she, when the cat face relaxed into the

fifty-year-old unmarried daughter—turned on her toe, seeing the flicker of gumption on his antique, worn-out features.

It was a half-moon articulation he'd seen on the stage, the feet at eye level and it was perfection. Even with the heavy bridal drapery like a hump of curtains without the connecting rod. His heart clapped with joy at the perfect figure cut into the gleaming hardwood floor. His life contained this art and had produced it. He accepted the two fingers of scotch coming his way from his daughter's gloved hand, closing his eyes in ecstasy.

Just a minute later, the car pulled up and the father of the bride escorted his dancer to dine on the water, but he had more coming to him, as he always did in the days of his marriage to her mother. And he waited for it, patient and ready.

After arranging the folds of her mother's heavy gown on the limo's plush seat, Veena leaned her head back and closed her eyes. The car wheels stroked the cushiony road. Books, movies, and a full bar of bottles were stacked on shelves behind the driver and facing the riders. Boxes of tissue and light cosmetics (vaseline, hand cream, water spritzer, cologne) near their hands. Father and bride held hands, listening to the music: the dance of the hours, streaming past them.

All of life passed before their eyes: the school house they'd both attended, the church where the father extended his basket of money, their favorite shops, taps, banks, and hospital, the cemetery where the Mrs. lay in her white container, and still the road flowed on in front of the driver's eyes, past the river and onto the sea.

Just ahead was the restaurant built on the pier and father and bride walked the planks of seasoned wood, hearing the waves and seeing them in between the cracks, roiling and sudsing up

the breakwater rocks. Farther and farther out they went, until the restaurant, Land's End, received them in its welcoming festoon of light.

People looked and some stared at the odd, yet familiar sight. The couple were led up the stairs to the lantern, where a table was set for them with candelabra and a silver service. When the cool wines were served and the waiter left a tray of preliminary delicacies, the father rose for a toast.

He had prepared, he had read standing before a mirror to test his mettle; he'd tried memorizing, but the words dissolved in his mouth at the sight of his own dessicated face, and imagining hers, so he wrote his toast on an index card but, without his glasses, which she'd plucked from his hand, couldn't see.

"Be natural, Daddy," she said. "It's just you and I."

But his eyes had filled with tears because, without his glasses, he couldn't see her darling face under the swirl of her white plumes.

"You were the love of my life." He waited, but the half-dissolved face didn't flinch. "My Maureen," he added.

Veena listened. The words were washed in tears, but also in the rushings of the sea so eager to reclaim the land owed it for its own dance floor. Her heart wrung these words dry and tested them in this solid state. He meant them, but what value did they have in their mutual state and age?

"A toast is not exactly rock-hard reality," she said, but nicely.

"I also have a present," he said.

"I go by a different name now," she said, "although we have the same last one."

Into her hands he placed a tape and here, as requested, was a player. The waiter cleared a space on the table and the father moved his chair NNW to be next to his girl. When the waiter

again left them to descend the stairs, closing the door behind him, the father popped in the little tape and before their eyes was the story of a lifetime on stage, starting with a spindly tot on half-toe. In each thrilling sequence the dancer grew and developed. Her brown hair turned black, her lightly cut features metamorphed into attic beauty, form into numbers, for a single dance, or maybe two, then softened again and were pulled by gravity in one direction and by will in another. Nothing like flight had ever been achieved, but grace was there for a span of moments before the little screen went dark.

The curve demonstrated by the film clips was a simple, easeful shape, not the jagged bound and rebound imagined in Veena's own account. Nothing extreme had been seen or shot by her dad with his movie camera. Or had he cut these moments from his account? She was looking him in the eye now, but his eye told no secrets and never had.

"Was it just as ordinary as that?" she said in a hoarse voice, "and just as pretty every step of the way?"

But he was not a man to answer a question. She had a handkerchief for him, embroidered all over with his name in a corner, but it wasn't time. He was ready now to toast his girl, his dancer, on the glorious day at the end of his life: her birthday.

The Offering

Don and Terry Adams leapt out of bed every morning, glad to be alive. They had clothes that fitted them, beautifully behaved children, and a four-bedroom house with twenty-four windows. Only the back wall was faceless, the part that fed into the garage and onto the concrete pad that Don called the patio and Terry the terrace. Daughter June called it the skating rink, and son Matt said it was far too small to deserve a name. It was plain white, and in the summer Terry dressed it up with cotton-covered beach chairs and a striped umbrella, although the space got but one hour of direct sunlight. Wine could be served after supper, and if you threw your head back, there above was the moonlit sky dripping with stars, a square of wondrous elevation. The family loved how it fed and focused their dreams, whether the pad from which they launched were patio, terrace, or rink.

There was one servant named Ellen, who came by day to vacuum the rugs and water the plants. The Adamses preferred to clean their own bathrooms and change their own sheets and, when it came to that, to launder their sheets in their own machines down in the basement where the dead plants were stored in their dusty pots. Terry was one who could not dispose

of anything that had enjoyed a moment of life. Don was tidy, so these dead greens—now brown, beige, black, or henna-red—were stacked on flimsy, aluminum shelves, sometimes three in a stack. It was a graveyard, a waste of space, but Terry didn't see it that way, and neither did Ellen, who had killed some of these plants early on, before she understood the ways of the family. The rows of vegetal decay and hibernation were, by turns, an eyesore, a graveyard, part of the doll theater, and cellar crud.

Ellen came on Wednesdays and Fridays when Terry was in the beauty shop, doing her specialty: tinting heads of gray and white with threads of lapis, silver, verdigris, and powder pink. Out of a rusty or tarnished or faded cap of curls (or straight pins), Terry's genius could make a star, moon, or seashell. Women were scheduled up to next Christmas for a varnish, which is what Terry called the process of stripping, coloring, washing, rinsing, and shellacking. Most of the profits of the small shop, Queen's Corner, went into Terry's pay envelope, which she gladly reinvested in leather chairs, antique mirrors, and a few decent rugs for the shop. In the bank's eyes, Terry Adams "owned" Q.C., but Ann Marie Sant still managed the business and her name was on the license. Terry's hands never smelled of anything but bleaches and paints, ammonia and hair oil. Everyone knew when "mother" was home. "You must learn," she said, when she was still rearing the twins, "not to use your nose when it's not wanted."

This was how "Mother," as Matt called her, with the quotation marks hanging in the air, tried to dictate the terms of their life at 17 Greygull, for, of course, beyond the house and the flat concrete square was the sea.

Don loved to bathe in it. His son, Matt, detested how his father lolled and floated in the opaque, marble-top ocean. He

skimmed the waves and lay his lard-colored body atop the shivering sea skin to roast in the sun. Sometimes he folded his arms under his head as if he were hanging in a hammock. Matt Adams watched from the bedroom window over the roof of the garage. His father took a midday "dip" and wouldn't it be nice, thought the son, if he just floated away to England, or even to those skimpy islands off the foot of England and its white cliffs. Matt knew his geography the way anybody would who lives at land's end of a large continent full of a mishmash of people and climates and terrains and man-mades. Matt was disgusted by what lay to the other side of the garage: his house and everything else that wasn't the sea. Only twice a day, at noon and at dusk, did Dad mar the pure flats of the dark Atlantic with his relaxing body.

June, the twin, felt differently. She looked out her bedroom window at the rooftops of Tingleman and Tingletown, the place where she was born, in the smallest village of the smallest state (and the poorest) in the world's richest country. Tingletown was her mother's birthplace, too. Ellen McIntyre, their maid, came from Tingleman, a remnant of the oldest family in the region. All the churchyards had a McIntyre and many of the founding parish priests were Macs from Dingle, southwest Ireland. Ireland was on the other side of the house, the side where brother Matt's room faced the sea, but Tingle was here, under June's bright but short-sighted eyes. Tingle, the home of the Adamses, but also the homeland of the McIntyres, and June loved Mrs. McIntyre with all her heart.

Mrs. McIntyre was June's secret godmother and had baptized her with well water and told her the story of Helen Keller, which made June wish she were deaf and dumb and made over like Helen to Mrs. McIntyre.

On Wednesdays and Fridays June ran home from school to catch Ellen's last good hour, before she went home on the bus. All the vacuuming was done and the plants were sitting with their roots deep in distilled water. The house smelled like a forest or a florist. June heard "forest," but Mrs. Mac said she meant florist. June was still little and didn't always know what people meant.

Matt was the same age and size, but he *did* know. How could you not know in a family like the Adamses and in a town as peculiar as Tingle. God forbid you didn't know your own mind! Matt liked Ellen okay but hated to see his sister fawning over the slipslopping maid, an offshoot of the town's aristocracy. His best friend, Goldie, was a Mac, but from the other side of the tracks, not the candy store side.

Matt dawdled on Wednesdays and Fridays, and by the time he got home, Ellen McIntyre was already standing at the bus stop with June's hand in her pocket. They held hands like that, and Matt had to keep his eyes glued to the sidewalk to avoid gagging. He didn't hate his sister as he hated his floating father, but he didn't like her either, or what she was growing into.

Mom came home on a cloud, whether it was Wednesday or Friday. It was wonderful to get out of the house, and just as good to come home. Four or five Tingle dames went home on those days with lighthouses on their heads, glowing like fireflies. Her home was clean, not a speck of dust or cat hair on the carpets, and every living plant swamped, although a better word was refreshed. A better word did the trick. It was nice to have a talent for hair, too. The twins, alive at birth, were growing up and soon they'd be gone. Her work as mom would be done. Terry had different names for them in her head: June and Matt were the names Don chose. They sounded cheerful to him and prosper-

ous and the children would grow into the names, if they weren't a natural fit. June was Junie and that was peachy, but Matt was turning out to be different from what he'd hoped, and more like the sound of his name: flat, hat, gnat. There was no long-vowel expanse and the double T was like two tight shoes. The boy winced when he heard his name. In a trice, Terry would have offered him hers. It was a flexible, boy-girl name, but the offer—and the too-loose spirit behind it—inclined the boy to deprecating thoughts about his mother. In his mind, he called her Mrs. Adams or the hairdresser until the horror of sharing a name had passed. Four good sleeps and he set it aside.

On this day, Dad got home first and put the steaks on. Dad liked meat really cooked, so a lot of tenderizer went into the Wednesday and Friday T-bones, Delmonicos, and New York strips. He used powder and a hammer and sucked on a cold drink with fruit floating on the top. His June was home second with a five-cent piece from Mrs. Mac. They exchanged money and kisses blown through the bus window. June came in, whisked through the kitchen where the meat was tenderizing and up the stairs to watch the Tingleman roofs, under one of which Mrs. Mac was going, and soon would be.

The hairdresser was next, arriving in a cloud of stinking chemicals. Worse today than usual, so Don covered the softened meat with a sheet of waxed paper. "Don't come in," he said. "Stay where you are."

Then, Matt, with a headache from an algebra test followed by a whole afternoon of art workshop. He had inherited a gift from his mother and drew intricate, feathered trees. One was hanging in the State House and named the state tree, although—like all his trees—it was inorganic and one of a kind. Matt made a peculiar leaf for each tree and no blending or averaging. Each

detail was pin perfect. But the trees were not from nature, or at least not the nature to be found here in seaside Tingle. The trees were passionate work and gave Matt a migraine if he did more than one. Today, Valentine's Day, he'd worked four: one for teacher, Miss Mullen, one for June, one for the hairdresser, and one for the floater. (Because it was winter, Matt was spared the sight of Dad lazing on the salt water. The salt water was free of boats. Winter was a good time of year for a sea lover, and Matt took advantage of it, asking Ellen McIntyre to clean his window each time.)

The trees were beautiful, and Miss Mullen wanted to keep them all for the school. There was no art budget, no pictures on the wall, and these four unique trees, each on a different color background, would gladden the halls of Middle School. Miss Mullen would pay for the framing and planned to send a tree to the *Tingle Telegram* for the Sunday magazine. "Fine," said her pupil, "but I've got to bring the other three home."

So, Miss Mullen had to let the ones on ruby, black, and emerald green go home to the Adamses. She kept the white one—a weeping tree—no flowers, no leaves, no buds, just a seagull with its feet in the tree's crux. "What do you call that part of a tree?" she asked the principal, but the principal thought it best not to specify. Not saying gave Miss Mullen the idea and she took the drawing home. It might be too sophisticated for the schoolhouse, but her old mother would enjoy it.

There was one thing in life Terry Adams wanted: the uncomplicated love of her only daughter. She felt she had some, but she couldn't feel it as she felt the embrace of the women whose heads she varnished. June would go along with things like calling the patio a terrace and tolerating the smell of per-

oxide, but there was a coolness beneath. Ellen McIntyre could have told her that she was getting nothing of what this miracle child could yield, but since Mrs. McIntyre and the hairdresser were never home at the same time, she didn't have to say anything. But Terry surely felt the spent energy, or had seen the relics on the girl's dresser: hankie, orange-flavored aspirin, a pair of beige, buttoned gloves. Gleanings, she would say if she had been able to name their origin. Little June was religious, and scattered among the old-lady's spill-off were a plastic rosary, light as a feather, a statue of St. Joseph, a mission box ready for Lenten sacrifices, and a prayer book. Matt was already an atheist, but nobody knew.

After Mrs. Adams mounted the stairs and entered the sun porch, Matt slipped out of his anchorage, looking for tacks for his trees. The tacks were in the kitchen and entry gave Matt an open view of his father crying. The floater had his suit on with an apron. His hands were floury from pounding the meat. As the tears coursed down his face, he wiped it, leaving streaks. Too dumbfounded to wheel around and retreat, Matt felt laughter bubbling up inside. Instead of explaining or even wiping off his dusty hand, the father wrapped both arms around the boy.

Matt stood still, but mentally zipped his mind to Tokyo, to escape his father, an adult in name only. The boy's sigh woke the father from his sad dream.

"I got nothin'," Don said, affecting an accent long gone even from Tingle.

"Please?" said the boy.

"I'm alive, but this ain't livin'."

Matt waited for a translation, but none came. With his thumb, the boy pointed upstairs to where the hairdresser had gone.

The father shrugged. He had said what he had to say. For him, it was a mouthful.

At dinner, June offered grace. Prayer was the bread between whose slices the steak dish was laid. June offered before and after grace for the souls of Mrs. McIntyre's dearly departed.

Matt saw her lips moving after the family had said their amens. He tried using his eyes to bore holes in his sister's trusting little face. June saw the cruel face, but the icons Mrs. McIntyre had fashioned of her dearest fortified her against the invasion.

Matt saw that his father's eyes, above his chewing jaws, were the eyes of a crying baby, soon to be wet again. What kind of treaty could he sign with this older man to give him what he got in summer from floating on the ocean? For his father needed year-round relief, and had said as much.

The hairdresser was tired at the end of her day. So many heads had passed under her talented hands. Fingers ached and palms sweated. A smell of root vinegar rose to her nostrils. Her daughter was soaking in holy water, her son was an egghead. The husband, whose name had floated away on the steak fumes, had tapioca for brains. But the glory of a special gift was still hers alone. Laugh after laugh fanned over the rubes. But, remembering where she was and who, Mrs. Adams put a hand over her mouth to stop the blistering review.

Lights blazed, night came. The sky clouded over, and the Adamses were tucked in their clean sheets. Eyes opened in the night with the tidal suck of the salivating sea. At the peel of a new day, the four Adamses faced compass points.

It was a Saturday, and ahead of them were scenes with nothing but each other. This idea was dawning on each, as he or she lay on her or his vector. Mom and Dad were anchored on the

same wood bed but canted away from each other with an angle measuring twenty degrees. Such a mix-up was life that four so separate brands had to share common ground before they shot off, each to underground or overland territories, some against their wills. For now, they had this first of many home Saturdays, fortified with nothing but a fatty steak dinner, extra-fleshy potatoes, and "garbage greens," as Matt called the broccoli rabe his father brought home. Better-than-cabbage was June's unspoken view, and crucifer roughage came from Terry's well-ordered brain. The smell of it, blent with the water-logged roots of the plants, penetrated the thin-walled suburban house, fisherman's cottage, said Terry, and no one crossed her because to the rest, the house was valueless.

Matt woke up first to the sound of a swirling sea, clue to a late-winter storm. He had not yet distributed his trees, not even to his father, who could use one. They were still in his book bag, resting between blanks and dry enough not to transfer signs. These trees were his bank book and his life insurance because just one day in his father's kitchen had aged him, causing him, at ten or eleven, to review his life and what was left to him.

The sea was a mass of air, water, and darkness. It smelled of seaweed, shells, and immaculately clean beach rocks. He opened his window and tasted the air on his tongue. The sea that day, raging and high, was no surface for floating, either on your back or dead-man's. The miracle was to have found in that alien element a caressing piece of parlor furniture. It occurred because his father was old-fashioned enough to think of Tingle Bay as his hometown. Matt could draw, and possessed the art from the moment he could hold a fat pencil or paper-wrapped crayon; but now, with the steak grease still in the air, he could

feel—if feeling was what it was to spot on that frenzied sea the pathetic raft of his father's floating summertime body. He knew that his father and he were related—by blood, by water, and by common climate. He put two fingers together to show just how close and yet still separate. Then he pulled down his window shade of paper so dry and spring so tight that it whipped itself up with a thunderous crack. Splinters of brittle paper flew through the air in a blinding arc. Matt was struck over the eyes and in the throat. He cried out.

The sea racket covered his cries, but his Dad found him. He sought him out as soon as he cleared his own bedroom with medusa dwelling there, with her puffy, stinking hands and mild disposition. She craved his husbandly attention early mornings, but the husband slunk away where, through the beaverboard of the upstairs bathroom, he heard the lashing of the storm. His son was in that bedroom whose bay hung over the rocks. He knocked on the boy's door. Turning the knob, he sensed behind him the presence of the two females, with their idle or morbid curiosity. They pressed him from behind with their woman's natural instinct for tragedy. Inside, in the terrible eye of the storm, lay Matt, under a confetti of yellowed chips and arrowheads.

"Now I see why I was sad," said Dad, but Mrs. Adams pushed her lazy, temporizing husband aside to reach the boy. Fifty or sixty flags were stuck in his neck and on his immature cheeks, one in the eyelid, and a few in the flesh of his chin. But it was the girl, the one with faith in God and in Mrs. McIntyre, who plucked out the tags, each a separate, bloody pain. Salt water from the girl's holy-water bottle (Mrs. McIntyre collected bay salt for the blessing of Msgr. Bill) slowed their flowing course.

And that day, June Adams got her period. The boy was on a

cleansing drip, entertaining the day nurse with his heretical talk, defanged now as he joked about it, saved as he was by a father's love and a sister's Roman Catholic saline.

This trouble formed the family's first organized memory, chapter one of the legend. They had lived (and nearly died) by a common menace, a household flaw, something that drew each back from his vector, to curve, crack, warp, melt, or fuse.

Their child, brother, twin, and cynic had given them a subject, a spot where Dad became a dad, sister a savior, brother a victim, and mother a sideliner.

The table was set Wednesday week, a beautiful false-spring morn, on the terrace patio. Ellen McIntyre had brought a hothouse plant with pink and purple petals. She offered the potted posies to the family of four, laying the pot on the table after the Adamses had left for their day. She said an original prayer for her goddaughter and a rote offering for the boy who'd almost lost his face to paper cuts. All day she did her chores to the tune of sun flooding in one window and out another. She stripped the bedclothes, a first, and saw the shrine established in her honor on Junie's dresser. The mirror above it was like a window where Ellen could see God's plan: finish the housework, launder the sheets, especially the one in hand with the flower of blood, paint the concrete courtyard, and open the downstairs windows to the fresh sea air that carried a message from the old country. And leave before the blessed child could return. It was time to go home for good, for her work was done. The Adamses' home was as clean as could be, and the monotony of Wednesday and Friday, with the duties that took her from Tingleman, more than a native could bear. The girl was grown up—or almost—and her sisterly love had slipped a gentle noose around the broth-

er's skinny trunk. The mister and missus were not her concern, but—as a parting gesture—she watered their plants up to their waxy, yellow necks. One plant, already dead, she carried to the basement shelves. Down there was a different environment.

Here were the things that had been set aside: leavings of this and earlier families. Shelf of plants, of toys, of house dressings (curtains, bedspreads, throw rugs), and old cords attaching the house to Tingle Power and Light. Second- and third-level excavations were to be found. Down here was the world before the Adamses' plantation, if this latest family could be said to have developed a root system to compare with the McIntyres', whose below-ground was as fine and dense as a hairnet. Mrs. McIntyre held her nose. People put their things in the underground when they wanted new, but the pit was not the proper place for these older worlds. The sea air would corrode. In no time this treasure would sink, dissolve, or float out to that mother pool constantly hungering. The sea had made a call and gotten through to Junie's twin. It used whatever armaments lay in its path. It was the oldest citizen with the longest claim.

Upstairs she opened her fresh paint can. In half a day's time, the patio floor was washed in a luscious wine hue. Sands pricked through the blush like a sea of pin waves. There were three blank walls: the angled wings of the house and the garage wall. The fourth was a natural scene: view of rocks and beach grass, visible through a thick wall of air. In the boy's room, while stripping bedclothes, Mrs. McIntyre had spotted the trees drawn on colored paper. She had rolled them up and stuck them in her bucket. If the ruby, black, and kelly green didn't clash, they might be nice out here. So she fixed the squares to the prickly walls.

UNTIMELY SOLUTIONS WERE FOUND on that day of days. Dad bought a boat—just a junker, a dinghy boat with a pair of oars. He bought it on time, paying a quarter now and thrice more over a five-week interval. No one would know or feel the difference. Why he was hiding it and the payments, he didn't know. Perhaps to surprise the boy, or to stun the woman with something that was all his own. Or even to cheer the menstruating girl. (He'd found the pad: "napkin" in their family bathroom, rolled in a nest of toilet paper.)

Then, the worst happened. The hairdresser made a house call to Tingle Village to dress the head of a corpse, Nellie McIntyre, as she was called by kin. The call came as Terry was dipping her hands in the bluish fluid that would turn a raven's wing into an ash blonde. Nellie's brother, Dan McIntyre, made the call. The cleaning lady had dropped dead hauling a beach umbrella anchored in a tub of concrete. It should never have been moved, said the hairdresser in self-defense, for it was a permanent installation, rain or shine, summer or winter. The fixing of the gray hair on the lady's thin-skulled head, cracked a little by the umbrella blow, was little enough to ask, the hairdresser quickly added, rolling up a leathern sleeve of combs, scissors, razors, and hairpicks. She put in a call to Don's bonemeal plant, but Don was out, they said, for lunch. At four o'clock? Mrs. Adams said, knowing nothing about the facts of her husband's day beyond the going and coming from 17 Greygull.

What to tell the girl? This the hairdresser thought while driving down to Tingle, where the undertaker, a McIntyre cousin, had a house over his shop. "Tell her nothing," came first from the personality that had driven the twin girl to the housekeeper's heart. "Lie" came in second with a kite tail of raggedy stories. "She returned home" (Terry Adams tried it out in the quiet of

the car) "to her native country." It was enough to bewilder the girl until the family could muster itself for the wake and obsequies, which could not be hidden. Inside the funeral home was a familiar smell of candle wax and sweet cooking—candied yams and Indian pudding. Even in her mobile cloud of dyes and aldehydes, Terry Adams could detect this sweetish cooking smell, and since Mrs. McIntyre did not cook for the Adamses, was it in her clothes or the folds of her skin?

The McIntyres were in the front room beginning the long ordeal of separation. They were old people and it had happened before, so that grief was familiar and well-worked. But even among her clan, Nellie was number one, and the horror of her disappearance had settled on their faces, which looked somewhat alike.

The hairdresser aimed her gaze at the candlelit room, or "chapel."

Meanwhile, the young lady who'd just a week ago become a woman was opening her own front door. Inside was not whom she expected to find, but before checking each room, June was stalled at the glass door that gave onto the patio terrace. On what was now a bleak February day—false springtime was clobbered by a cloud army that raced up the coast on an arctic front—June beheld the very sun on a palette of tropical heat. The painted colors swarmed, the trees exhaled thought perfume that even a youth could detect. The empty wall was just the real February day with its chill monohue. She stood and gazed. Behind her, minutes later, the boy pulled up. Her excitement was his downfall. This was not the setting for his trees, this jungle heat, and salt tears rose up his windpipe and squeezed through his eyes and over the injuries. He knew now that his trees weren't real, or no more real than this paint job on the only part of the house

with no character. The boy drifted away from the artificial site. Up in his room, the fresh winds had stirred the winter-black sea, and he cooled his eyes on the view. The phone was ringing with incipient news of untimely death, murder, or just deserts. June picked up the phone and, before her mother's irritating signal set her eardrum vibrating, the father was at the front door and he, too, was seeing clear through to the painted paradise. He knew who was the artist and the stiff, whose crown had been dressed by his wife's talented fingers: witch, martyr, devil, queen.

THE HAIR WAS BEAUTIFUL, dressed with the fruits of the beautician's every skill and lucky shot. It lay on the dead Irishwoman's small skull like a nest, a lawn, the feather wings of a Dingle bird. June kissed the head of her queen and clasped the hand of the birth mother who'd dressed her queen in glory. The father drew back to a place well behind the McIntyres, his only son beside him. Candles glowed in the dark as the offering drifted upward.

Dream Date

In our family, the word "outsider" meant neighbors, friends, in-laws, and even my aunt's family who lived up in New York State, a hundred miles away. Outsiders were cars that drove around our corner too fast, and our grandmother, who boarded with us, and sat for dinner at her own table by the window. When my sister started dating, she was one and, when I went to college, I was two.

Maddy—the one with the boyfriends—was tough, bad-tempered, as ready to slap as to breathe and, although only one year younger, I watched my mouth with Maddy, and even our older sister, Franny, kept her eyes peeled. Then there was Shrimp, our baby sister, seen but not heard. No one needed to sit on her. My mother, scared her baby was being bullied and crushed by the brutes laying about, kept Shrimp close, hand in hand, or on Mumma's lap.

"Put that big kid down!" my father would yell. "She's too old!"

"Never you mind," Mumma would say, gathering Shrimp's long legs and holding her five-foot, string-bean form just like a baby.

"Enough to make you sick," my father would say.

"Oh, you," Mumma would say back, "get used to it."

"Don't you speak to me that way!"

"Put it up," we'd hear from the kitchen, where Nana was sitting eating soft, sweet things with her false teeth.

"I don't need to hear from you!" my father would roar.

"Am I a prisoner? Am I a slave?" Nana would say. "If I am, just tell me, and I'll move back to the Y."

"Now," said Mumma, with Shrimp already sniveling—she had an ulcer and hated a fight—"see what you've done!"

At a moment like that, Maddy, Franny, and I would scram, rather than be caught picking sides. But we couldn't all leave at once. "Chickens! Look at the chickens!" my mother would start, and my father would finish. Turn your back on that mob and you'd never know who'd hurl the blade. It was too much of a temptation. Even my grandmother got into the act. "Leave-taker, scaredy-cat, crybaby," you'd hear with a tinkling laugh, as the yellow-belly was cast out, and all the rest ganging up, suddenly friends, allies, and who knew for how long.

As often as not, I was the one they were zinging. As I pulled my heavy legs up the narrow, curved, and carpeted stairs, I always stopped to look out the window, although what was there but a dumb dog (Lucky or Brutus lollygagging up the street), or the McInernys' house with the shades still down at twelve noon. What were they doing in there? It was a pigsty, I'd heard my mother say, a hellhole. Later, though, the shades would fly up, the lights come on, and cars line the street. The McIninnys—as we called them—were always having company. "What do they do," my mother wanted to know, crowding me out of the window to get an eyeful, "sweep it all under the rug?" Because the McIninnies could shape things up just fine—we knew that be-

cause, although we were never invited as company, I'd seen it a few times and reported. Not only all "picked up" and vaccd, but the Hummel figurines dusted and the Belleek tea set out with hot tea and Irish bread. "But," I told my mother, all ears, "if any of those hoity-toity guests—the bishop or the bishop's cousin or the Jesuit brother, or the nun sister, or the cousins who'd made money in beer trucks—pushed open that kitchen door..."

"Tell me!" my mother would scream.

"I can't describe it," I'd say.

"Try." ("Don't get started," I'd hear from downstairs.) "Dishes in the sink?" she'd ask.

"Not only," I'd say.

"Laundry piled up in the pantry?" I nodded. Schoolbooks and woolen hats and cupcake tins, old hairless dolls and mousetraps, Danny's cassock and surplice on the table with the baby's diaper and the eggy plates from breakfast with cigarette butts and—.

"Go on."

But now I had to whisper, because my father did and didn't want to hear—beer cans and whisky bottles, gingerale and Tom Collins mix, seltzer water and maraschino cherries, the ice cube tray and the highball "sweaters" from the last time company came, or just last night after supper, when the kids were upstairs raising Cain behind those pulled shades and the old folks—Cat and Bob and sometimes the old granddad, Big Dan—were having a few.

"You can see all that from here?" my mother would say, jabbing me with an elbow and pointing to where the neat gray house had all its eyes closed, protected from the likes of us.

To the McIninnies, we the Finnegans were outsiders, even though our house was clean, the shades were open at nine sharp,

sometimes eight, for anyone to see, and no empties slipped out in brown paper bags.

One day, though, the sky fell and Danny Mac, kingpin of the McIninny tribe, invited me, Eileen Finnegan, to a canteen dance.

"Queen for a day!" my father roared, when he heard.

"What'd you have to pay him?" Maddy said. "I know that guy. He likes hard cash."

"What are you going to wear!" Franny shrieked.

"Slow down!" my mother added.

And my dream, the dream of a lifetime—or at least five years, because Danny was dream date parfait with a cherry on top—received its first pinprick, but not its last.

I had five days and four nights to get ready, to gather my wits, but I had not five minutes' peace. "Whatcha doin'?" I'd hear, just as I was flinging a petticoat of Maddy's over my head of curlers. I stripped it off and under the bedspread and lay on it, as Maddy leapt in. (The door locks, but the screws are loose.) "Oh, pretty!" she said. "He should see you now. I wish I had a camera."

In the mirror: moon face with a halo of brush rollers, pink pins stuck in them like nails. "I'm cute!" I said.

"Cute as death," she said, flopping on the bed, feeling the lump, pulling out the brand new petticoat, worn only once, and the fur flew. "You dirty rat. Where'd you find this?"

But after she'd beat on me and screamed in my face and extorted a promise for scouring the pots for a week, and taking the garbage out, too, she flung it in my face. "Here. You need it," she said. "So, what gladrags are you going to wear? You're not wearing anything else of mine!"

I considered. I *was* wearing something else of hers, but it

wasn't time yet to announce it. I was thinking. "You are!" she said. And then I was begging.

"Here," she said. "Gimme that brush." I found the brush in the shambles of my dresser top, and suddenly the pins and rollers were dropping on the rug and my poor hair, just some tufts from the last cheap haircut, which I repaired myself with the sewing shears, was being yanked by the rough brushing. "I'll fix you up," she said. "And I won't charge."

"Sure," I said, and I let her practice. My eyelashes were curled, eye shadow smeared on the top lid, and cake rouge applied to the cheeks and some on the nose. My hair teased and sprayed so it looked just like a shower cap. When she was finished, I was crying.

"What's going on?" my mother said. "Why is your sister crying?"

"I don't know," Maddy said, tossing the brush on the dresser and sashaying out the door.

"What's wrong with you?" my mother said. "What's that stuff all over your face? Are you coming down with something?"

I pushed them out and locked the door behind them, hammering in those loose screws with a dress loafer. There was nothing for me but to cancel the date. But, oh no you don't! they said. Don't be a baby. And Maddy pushed open the door, screws pulled right out of the rotten wood, and threw in the purple skirt and white blouse I wanted to wear and were almost brand new, and my mother, a pair of nylons still in their cardboard. "Your hair'll grow back by Friday," my mother said, and I could hear them laughing. It was mean, yes, but I knew I would go.

ॐ

How did it happen that a teacher's pet, immature, not yet fifteen but already as big as my mother, would be asked to a

canteen dance by a dreamboat like Danny Mac? I asked myself this question, long after the gang of boys came up to me in the schoolyard, where Mary Pat Eddy and I were doing gimp. They climbed the fence dividing boys from girls. "Hey, Finnegan!"

"What?" I said.

Mary ran away. She hated boys. I picked up the blue and white gimp she'd dropped. She'd made a mess anyway, and I fixed it.

"Hey Finnegan, what are you deaf?"

"I heard you."

"Dan McIninny wants to talk to you."

I looked up.

"He's over at the bubbler," they said.

"So what's it to me?" I said, because these boys—or any boys—had never given me the time of day, and nothing had occurred that I knew of to change that.

"Go and find out." Off the fence they jumped, and ran.

I considered. What did I, a Finnegan, have to offer Danny Mac that he would want to talk to me? Did I have anything on him? I did, but so did everybody else. He was a pervert, a liar, and a sneak, and everyone knew it. He was also an altar boy, a choirboy, he had a vocation to be a Jesuit like his uncle, and would be class valedictorian when we graduated in ninth grade. Everything he did was pluperfect, even though, underneath, it was a different story. Just like the McIninny house.

I was too curious not to take the bait. Over by the bubbler, Danny—blue eyes, blond crewcut, a little pudgy, but skin so smooth and nose so freckly cute, most of the girls couldn't look him in the eye for the pain of it.

"Hi, Eye. How's the family?" He shook my hand.

"Fine and you?" I said.

"Good, thanks. I wanted to ask you a favor, Eye."

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you now?"

"Go ahead."

"Eye, you know the canteen dance up at St. Peter's Latin every Friday night? Eighth graders invited every fourth week? I'm meeting somebody. A girl from the public. You don't know her, or maybe you do. I was wondering if you'd do me a big, big favor. I'd practically kiss your feet."

"What?"

"Loan this girl, Pinky Belliveau, she lives on Regent Avenue behind Mosca's—your Mary Queen blazer, so she can put it on and get in. Once you're in, throw it out the window. Get it?"

"Yeah, I get it."

"Will you do it? Pretty please, Eileen Finn, with toasted almonds, hot fudge, and cherry on top."

"I don't know," I said.

"Say yes," he said.

"Okay."

"You're a peach," he said, giving me a punch in the arm.

I had never been (Maddy had, of course) to a canteen dance, but I knew the score. You met a boy there, or you went stag with a bunch of girls and stood so close together that no boy in his right mind would crack the circle. But my friends didn't go to canteen dances, and no boy had ever invited me to meet him there.

That was a Monday and now was the Friday. At breakfast no one remembered so I had peace and quiet. Nana had made a pot of Wheatena and I spooned a gluey inch in my Peter Rabbit bowl, using my baby spoon with the loop to stick my thumb in.

Maddy saw it and laughed. "I don't get it," she said, and then, "oh yes, I do! You're scared, you guppy! She's scared," she turned to my mother, scraping a piece of burnt toast. "Today's her date with Danny Mac!" Everyone—Nana, Daddy, Mumma, Franny, and Mad—looked.

"Eileen Frances," my mother said, "put that stupid baby bowl back. And get yourself a real spoon. Are you mental?"

My father—it was early for him—was swearing under his breath; he took his coffee into the den, but we could still hear him, and he us.

"Mind your own beeswack," I said.

"Danny and Eileen, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S," Maddy started, "i-n-g."

"Tell her to stop," I said to Mumma.

"You tell her. And eat up. You'll be late and I'm not driving you."

"Maddy," I said, trying another tone, "why are you doing this to me?"

She looked at me, thoughtful. "I'm on your side. I know what you're facing. But that doesn't mean you should suck your thumb and wear your rubber pants."

I scraped my Wheatena into the sink and rinsed out my baby bowl. "Are there any donuts?" I said.

"Look," my mother said. "You've got eyes."

I ate two sugar donuts and drank a milky coffee and was reaching for a cinnamon cruller when my mother grabbed my hand. "First you're a baby, now you're a pig?" I was still pinching the cruller. "Put it down," my mother said.

"I'll eat it later."

"No, you won't," she said, prying it out of my hand. "If you

eat donuts all day, you won't fit into your sister's skirt. Have you thought of that, my girl? Oh, no!"

"I have a stomach ache."

"Go to school!"

I collected my books and dumped them into my bookbag with my name chalked all over it in different fancy scripts, and left.

My mother's head was out the window: "Aren't you going to say goodbye?"

I kept walking.

"Eileen Finnegan," I heard, "stand up straight!"

I looked out of the corner of my eye, head down, at the McIninnies, shades all pulled, quiet, no hullabaloo, and out of that stinking pigpen would come the four Macs, clean, neat, every corn-silk hair brushed smooth. How could they even, I wondered, find a comb in that rubble? I looked down at my uniform skirt, not visibly stained, but sticky in places. The hem was pinned and my knees socks slipping down to my ankles. Even my underpants had a loose elastic around the waist. If I didn't hitch them up high, down they'd come—not all the way down, but drooping, then inching down. Under my schoolbag, propped over my chest, I kept a thumb hooked around both waistbands. I wasn't going back to change.

By mid-morning devotion ("O, Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you my prayers, works, joys, and sufferings—"), I was wide awake, my hand shooting up to answer every question: bible history, cube root, French and Indian war—didn't matter. But Sister Magdalen didn't call on me once. "I know *you* know," she said, dismissing my answer to a "thought" question about faith and free will. Luckily, Danny

Mac was in none of my Friday classes. He had Sister Ethna; she could control the boys.

After lunch and the walk home and back, I was fagged and was resting my head on the desk, when my name was called out. "Miss Finnegan! Wake up, Miss. Come up here, please." Sister Mags told me to take a drink at the bubbler and splash my face, while I was at it. I got out of there before I had to hear any remarks about my "home" life and getting the proper rest and nourishment. Why is it, I wondered, that the nuns and priests, and whoever was paying attention, thought my family, my house, my standards were low and uncleanly, when the McIninnies, who deserved their scorn and more, were given the benefit of the doubt? Where did we go wrong? That's what I heard my father say, or think and not say. This was depressing, especially given what I was facing, as family envoy, so instead of going back, I left the school through the front door, which no student ever used, and even the nuns took only on special occasions.

I stood on the top step of Mary Queen School, right under the motto, "*spes messa in semina*," special mess in the seminary, is what we thought. I looked out—no cars on the street, no priests in the churchyard, no nuns on the walk, no bats in the belfry, no sacristans, no biddies in black, no stray dogs, not even a hunk of newspaper floating down the street. I sat down on the steps—forbidden at all times because of the slovenly look of it. I pulled my uniform skirt over my knees and down to my ankles and tucked it between my legs, in case anybody wanted to see. Who wants to look at the likes of you? I heard myself think. But people do look! That was also true. My next thought was: And they're more interested if it's something you're trying to hide. But there were other reasons, too. I was deep into these reasons

when the monsignor's car, a black Buick bought new last Easter with cash (my father's words every time the subject came up), wheeled around the corner and stopped.

"Hey, little girl," I heard, but there was a certain curl of thought just out of my reach and I wanted to get nearer, because then, something mysterious might add up. "Miss?" I heard and soon the monsignor, a big man, was clunking up the steps in his black shoes. "Do the sisters know you're out here?"

I took a moment to think, but the lie was already there on the tip of my tongue. "Yes, Father."

He thought a minute. "Are you in detention?"

"No," I said.

He kicked something off his shoe and looked at his watch, then shook down his cuffs. "I've gotta go. Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

"I'm off to the Veterans' Hospital."

"Oh, yeah? Why?" I said, although you were never supposed to ask a priest (or nun) an idle question.

"Why?" he repeated. He looked once at the rectory door, as if he expected to see someone he knew. "Visit the sick," he said.

"Bring them communion?" I said, "the last rites?"

"Not today," he said. "Just a visit. I go on Fridays. I know some guys up there. Is your father a veteran?"

"Yup."

"Well, I gotta go now, little Miss. I'll be late. Why don't you go back in now? It's almost time to go home. They'll be missing you now, won't they?"

I looked at him. I often thought you could tell better what people were thinking if they wore glasses because things were reflected in the glass, but the monsignor's face was empty, maybe

just a little impatient. His hand was in his pocket shaking his keys.

"Will you be all right?" he said.

"Yes, Father," I said.

"You want me to walk you back in there? That way," he said, winking, "they won't kill you for disappearing."

"They won't kill me," I said, winking back. "Don't worry. So long, Father."

"Shall I give you my blessing?"

"Aren't you getting late?" I said.

He looked at me, and I looked back. "You're a real little wisecracker, aren't you?" he said. "Run along now, before I lose my temper."

But I didn't. I watched him drive away and only then did I stand up, dust off my skirt, and open the big glass door. It was quiet and smelled of wax and furniture polish, dust and poster paints and old milk, paper bags and winter coats and radiator fluid; the nuns always had their own smell, especially in summer. I stood there in the "vestibule" until all the bells went off, then I snuck down the side of the corridor, merging with the lines of marching students. Everyone saw, but no one squealed. I waited for my own class to file out and squeezed between Mary Eddy and Geraldine Makem.

I didn't have books, bag, assignment pad, but I didn't care. I was all set, because out there on the steps, talking to Msgr. Cavanaugh, and even before talking to him, something had come to me. No matter what happened, I was the one with the date.

IT WAS AFTER SUPPER and everyone but Nana and Daddy were in my room pestering me. I still had spoolies in my hair. Underneath my bathrobe and slip were a training bra and panty girdle

borrowed from Mumma to help me fit into Maddy's straight skirt with the kick pleat. The ironed blouse was hanging on a doorknob with a little ribbon tie that matched the skirt. I was sweating bullets and my face was gleaming from the beauty mask that Maddy had smeared on and peeled off. She was applying lipstick (a color my father wouldn't see as I was slipping out the door), then she coated my eyelashes with vaseline and I rubbed it in. "Eye!" she screamed. "Now your eyes are all red!" I looked in the mirror and they were, or one was.

"Get the witch hazel," said Mumma, and Shrimp ran to the bathroom.

Things settled down. I stepped into the skirt—it fit just right if I sucked in my breath—tucked in the blouse and tied the ribbon under the collar, but Mad slapped my hands away and tied it herself. Everyone was quiet.

"You must be on pins and needles," Mumma said.

"You should feel her hands," said Mad. "Ice cold and yick!" she said, as I placed one of them on her neck.

"Are you all set?" my father said, cracking the door to peek in. He was driving me, but the whole family was going along, even Nana. No one wanted to miss it.

Dad whistled ("Is that my little girl?") and other things embarrassing but predictable, and Mad sprayed me with "toilet water"—that's what they call it.

I had forgotten my shoes. Back they went in a mob to fetch them. I walked down the stairs and stopped at the window.

"Keep going!"

They were all behind me, but I pointed to the McIninny house, still shaded. We were all quiet. We looked, but nothing happened. And there was no sign that anything was going to happen. "Doesn't matter," my mother said. "Keep your chin up."

"And act like a lady!" my father chimed in.

Maddy whispered in my ear to remember not to let his arm dip below the waist, or he might feel the girdle. "Yeah, I know," I said. What they didn't know was no dances were planned between Danny and me. I was on my own.

They dropped me off at the curb in front of a mob of kids. A line was forming, so long I had to walk halfway around the school to find the end of it. A Christian Brother was monitoring a straggly group, nervous boy and girl and two older girls, sixteen or seventeen—why would they even want to go? The brother in a cassock was standing alone with his back to the hedge. I lined up behind the older girls. They were just immature enough to turn their backs and fold in their shoulders, as if I might angle my way into their group. Their voices were low, but I could still hear.

"Is that Mary Queen," I heard behind me, "that you go to? My sister went there." It was the brother. "And so did my mother and my aunt."

"Good evening, Brother," I said.

The girls turned, but rotated back when the male voice was who they'd forgotten was standing there. Where do you live? What does your father do? All this and more he wanted to know, but soon the line was moving. He had gone to St. Pete's for high, then entered the CBs. We walked around the edge of the campus together. He was young—I could tell—and had two brothers, one a Jesuit and another a Christian Brother, farther along. His sister was a nun.

"The whole family!" I said, less polite than I should have been to the cloth, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Yup. My mother cried every time, and with me, the baby of

the family, they had to put her up in Butler, she had such a case of nerves."

"And you still went?"

He didn't answer. He was a step behind me and then two steps. Some other kids had come along, dropped off or just walked, and they tread the sidewalk behind me. It took an hour to make it to the door, where on one side they collected the dollar fifty and, on the other, checked IDs and pinned an orange cardboard circle to the school blazers. I was in, and so was the baby of the family; right behind me.

I'd never seen the inside of this school and I stopped to look at a classroom—brown paneling, light green walls, crucifix and clock.

"Do you want to see my homeroom?" I heard.

"I'm supposed to meet some kids," I said. "Just friends," I said, "and it's so crowded. But maybe after?" I added, and he looked relieved. Who wants to be snubbed by a kid? He said where his posts were. He had to keep moving between two and sometimes three spots. Would I remember? I said yes, and he turned—to take up the first spot, I thought—but instead he went downstairs.

After a half hour of circling, I bumped into Danny Mac near the bandstand. Hardly anyone was dancing: it was early. "Hey, Finnegan," he said.

"Hi, Danny."

"Pinky couldn't make it," he said.

"She couldn't?"

"So I don't need your jacket after all. You can keep it on."

I had already taken it off, although the plan had been to remove it in the girls' room and toss it out the window. No one

was supposed to remove the blazer "with school insignia" while on the property.

"You can put it back on. Here," he said, holding it for me. "How's the family?" he said, right into my ear.

"Fine. How are the McIninnies?"

He smiled to hear how I said it. "We're all fine. You wanna dance?"

I didn't think I'd heard right, and I was on the brink of saying what? excuse me? please? or come again? as my father would say, when I felt his hand on my back and leading me to a corner of a dance floor slowly filling with couples. "Blue Velvet" by Bobby Vinton, a slow song. I was a taller than Danny but he was bulkier.

It was just the one dance—he had other plans for a Friday night, with or without Pinky, and only a fraction of this fun would be had at a boy-girl dance at St. Pete's, or at least that's the impression he gave me. I wasn't really listening. I was doing four things: feeling the print of his hand on my waist, especially when he pulled me in tight and I could feel the shape of his belt buckle, if I let my stomach relax to meet it. There was also the feel and smell of his school jacket shoulder with him in it and—last of all, only for a few minutes, but enough to remember till I graduated and had something else to replace it—the touch of that smooth, pure McIninny skin on my cheek, jaw, and, sometimes, neck. Danny Mac said he was dog tired and was just going to rest his head on my blazer shoulder, but I could feel lips on my neck and from there a wire shot to everywhere else—electric but also something cozy as sleep. When he lifted his head, he told me a joke.

Two minutes later the brothers had to pull us apart—not my friend, but an older one and another who knew Danny Mac. But

before they got there, the McIninnies and the Finnegans from across the street were one unit, one slow-moving ball. Where did Finnegan begin and McIninny end? At the end of the song (the longest I'd ever heard, but also the shortest), and before the brother landed on us, Danny Mac put both lips on my hot cheek and kissed it. When I tried to return the favor, he told me another joke, then said, you're a good kid, Eileen Finn, you're all right.

I needed to sit down so I picked my way through the corridor pairs and groups and was about to fall down the marble steps when I grabbed the railing (was I going to be sick?) and then leaned against the wall. Little by little, I made my way to the basement where I knew Cokes would be sold for a quarter apiece. I bought an orange Nehi and flung myself into a chair. Just sitting at a high-school boy's desk was a thrill, and the sweet soda bubbling down my throat reminded me of where I had been and with whom. I put my head down on the desk; I wanted to cry and ease some of it out of my system when I heard a chair scraping and a body hurling itself down.

Behind my eyelids, I could see myself in a gown; the Finnegans on one side of the church, the Macs on the other. All seven Finns would—from that day forward—parade across the street and on Friday, every Friday, the door would open and everything the McIninnies had behind the walls of their house—the things we could sometimes see and hear from all the way across the street: the jokes, the ice clinking in glasses, the roars of laughter, the party-perfect Mac living room with the rubble ranged behind closed doors—would be ours.

I looked up. The brother was there, of course, baby of the family, and for a minute, I thought he, too, had been invited to the McIninnies. I smiled at him, and then I burst into tears.

Back home, where the baby and another brother drove me, and rang the bell to deliver me, I was sent upstairs, but came right back down. The brothers couldn't explain what had happened when asked. "Maybe she was overheated," the baby said. "It's a warm night."

"Calm down," my mother said, bringing me a St. Joseph's orange aspirin and water. "Quiet down now."

"I don't want to quiet down," I felt like saying. I never wanted to quiet down again.

The brothers took off: evening prayers and lights out and maybe they had to clean up after the canteen dance—bottle caps and cupcake papers, and put all the chairs back in the assembly hall.

"Go to bed now," my mother said. "You're overtired."

And here was Maddy coming home from her date. I knew it was Maddy because my mother rushed over to flick on the porch light before they had settled on the steps for something Maddy would have to confess on Saturday.

The surprise was no one tattled to Maddy, who'd never let me live it down about crying like a baby and being driven home by the Christian Brothers half an hour before my father was set to pick me up. Not a word was said. A first. Instead we all sat down in the den. Even Nana came down in robe and slippers with Shrimp in tow, who left my grandmother's custody to climb on my mother's lap, and no lip from my father either.

We were at peace, why?

I was going to figure out why, but Maddy was plying me with questions. And my mother wanted to know too, now that the crisis was past. What was it like?

What was it like? I closed my eyes, but there was no wedding in there. Just the goofy face of the baby telling why he'd be-

come a brother and not a priest, as if—at that moment—I cared! He'd become a brother because, although he had a vocation, he didn't know how much of one; the brotherhood was something in between, but closer to the laity. It's easier to leave, he'd said, it's not as final a vow. Had I studied theology in school, yet, did I understand the difference? he asked me. I said I thought I did.

But Maddy and Mumma wouldn't want to hear any of this, so I told them the clean joke. (The second one had embarrassed even me.)

"Big deal," said Maddy. "He told you a joke. Was it worth all that trouble?"

"He has a vocation," I said. "That's what he told me. He wanted to go to a dance with a girl before he gave all that up."

"Get outta here!" Maddy said.

"Yes, he does," I said. "He's entering right after high."

"Why did he pick you, then?"

"He liked me."

"What good is it if he's going to become a priest?"

"He's not a priest yet."

"That's a sacrilege!'

I could have gone on with this crock, but something about the conversation was irritating my father. It was one thing to get an invite from a McIninny, but another (I could read his mind on this one) to make too big a deal of it.

My mother might have pelted me with a few more questions, but she was tired. Maddy was hungry and made herself a snack. "Go ahead," she said, before she left the den, "be selfish. Don't tell us anything. No one's interested anyway."

"Leave her alone," my mother said. "I gotta get this one," meaning Shrimp, "to bed." Everyone trailed off to bed. I was still sitting in my chair. "Turn the lights out," my father said. On the

way up to bed, I stopped by the stairway window. Sure enough: every one of those lights was blazing. Cars were still in front of the house. Maddy was right behind me, taking up most of the room. "Big deal," she said. "Whatever it was, big deal."

After I washed my face and brushed my teeth and read a magazine in the bathroom—"Put that light out!" my father yelled—I went back to the window. The lights were out. Even the McIninnies were asleep. I sat on the steps, so low down that all I could see with my head thrown back was the navy blue and speckled sky.

Welcome Wherever He Went

[1]

Mr. Saintsbury was only five years old when his Uncle Mike gave him ten dollars to paint the cellar walls apple green. The kid could only reach yay high, so the green apples were overhung with that misty blue that Aunt Alice ordered for each room she had reason to enter. Misty blue or misty violet was so close to her heart that even her underclothes—slips and dirndls, petticoats and skivvies—were bathed in Rit dye before they were even washed. Uncle picked up a can of pre-mixed glossy at Benny's with a brush sized for a child hand. The boy was allowed everywhere from the day his parents, with four other children like steps in a stair, dispatched him to 54 Amity Street, the only boy out of five and Uncle Mike having none of his own. The O'Loughs lived within earshot of St. Teresa's church, school, and rectory, their view blocked by the two-story, next-door neighbor and funeral home. Mr. Saintsbury could look out the backstairs' window and see the garage where the stiffs were kept on ice. He had seen them wheeled in a trolley or on a stretcher. No one had told him what a "stiff" was, but he knew it

had something to do with what came back out the front door in a wooden chest, then rolled across the street and up the church steps. What happened after that, he didn't know, because you had to be in second grade to get past the door at 52, his Uncle Mike said, when they stood watching their neighbor, Mr. Frank Maher, standing there in his black cutaway and striped pants and top hat. Mr. Saintsbury knew not to ask his uncle what a stiff was because he was sure his uncle knew he knew. At his age, there wasn't much he didn't know, and when he guessed, ten to one, he was "right on the money."

Mr. Saintsbury's four sisters were named Anne, Barbara, Cookie, and Deirdre, and, of course, Uncle Mike called them A, B, C, and D, but not to their face. They were nice girls—some had curls and some, straight, one was a senior, one a Girl Scout, one wore glasses, and one his father called a tramp. Uncle Mike said they'd turn out okay; he wasn't worried about them; Baby Brother was a different story, but Baby Brother was all his. The O'Loughs had the money for his needs and the extra bedroom. It was that simple.

And it was just like the boy to get not a lick of green paint on his overalls, or his shirttail, or his brown hightops, like baby shoes only brown. The steel brace fitted right into these shoes and couldn't be pulled out or fall out. Under the overalls, all you saw was shoe, scuffed toe, and lacings with knots instead of bows. Getting downstairs was no problem with these shoes, which cost his Dad an "arm and a leg" and were meant to last forever, or until Mr. Saintsbury went back for his three-week stay at St. Joe's. He liked the nuns, but a stay at St. Joe's was no picnic, not even for someone like himself with so much on the ball.

His hands were okay, and he was a beefy enough boy to take

the quart can from his uncle's hand once the lid had been pried off with a screwdriver. The cellar walls were damp and bumpy, and the cellar windows caked with dust and grime. They were never washed, so whatever rolled up the driveway and over the grass stuck to the little windows. All the strings to lightbulbs had to be pulled, and, even then, the cellar was dark and the misty-blue walls almost as gray as the day.

Uncle Mike had things to do, so Mr. Saintsbury was left in peace in the damp cellar with a clean paintbrush and a hat on his head made of folded newspaper. He was already a happy boy and "full of life," but this job shot him through with hot joy. He didn't stop to think, smart as he was and shrewd, how his aunt would take it.

One lick of the gleaming, bright paint slapped on the smoke-colored walls was enough to put all thought of his peculiar Aunt Alice out of his mind. He had seen this effect on his uncle, one and a half "cold ones" into the evening, with or without a boxing match on the radio. He liked the way one part of life could smack over another if you had the idea for it and you did it. What was his uncle doing while Mr. Saintsbury was painting the cellar walls? He was down at the candy store placing a bet on the daily double—the dogs, the ponies, or even the carriage races, which were mostly worthless unless nothing else was running that day. From Jigger's, he'd go to the Old Timers' for a quick one, then to High Point cemetery to mow the grass for a fin, then on to the fish market to see what had happened at the race track, and back to the Old Timers' Tap with all the time in the world to meet Aunt Alice's bus and carry home her grocery bag. It was Saturday and Saturdays were lucky days.

The first coat of paint was sucked clean into the dusty cement, so Mr. Saintsbury laid on a second in the square he had

picked out, right next to the trunk where all the old drapes and lace curtains were kept in moth balls. "Do not," he told himself, climb on the back of Aunt Alice's trunk to reach above the square he had painted. "Do not," he said again, in a voice no one used on him from the moment he could talk, or maybe even before, when he could express himself with the use of his eyes. It was a voice often used on A, B, and C—D was a lost cause—when they got out of line. He said do not, but up on the trunk he went, dragging the dead leg behind the live one. The dead one was no thicker than a chicken bone. Up there, he could see out the window, grabbing onto the sill with mitts still shaped like baby hands, all dough. His eyes behind their glasses were on a level with the ground, and the ground was fringed with grass. It was his first view from this angle and pleasing in the way it turned the ground into a covering like water, flat and spreading out smoothly to meet the line of stones that marked the end of their yard and the beginning of Frank Maher's driveway. He took his brush, thick with apple green, and painted over the window, leaving just a spyhole for his eye.

When his uncle got home with Aunt Alice on his arm, the job wasn't done, far from it, so Mr. Saintsbury asked his uncle to lift him so that he could drop the hook into the eye that locked the cellar door. Then he went to the den to climb on his Uncle Mike's lap and listen to him read the news stories with his glasses dripping off his nose. His Uncle Mike knew everybody in the city and could tell you the story that went with each name. Uncle Mike's vest was itchy if you put your face right on it, and it smelled of smoke and beer and sweat. Mr. Saintsbury inhaled a lungful, content to lay his head against his uncle's shoulder and listen to the stories of graft, scabs, mother's aid, the price of coal—everything but what Uncle Mike was looking at and

thinking about, which Mr. Saintsbury could see right under their nose: the sports page and the racing names, odds and finals.

Only five nights out of six, as his aunt said, did his uncle go overboard with the drink and get "stinking." Once he'd finished the line up of quart bottles in the icebox, he'd hit the hard stuff saved for Sunday afternoon visits from Uncle Tom. Lighter fluid! his aunt would scream, where's the lighter fluid and matches! This was their business, that's what Mr. Saintsbury's father had said when they took the boy from him. Stay out of it, so he would go to the pantry, close the swing door, and climb in among the pots with his hands over his ears. His uncle never "struck" him, but the plaster on the walls had some holes, and there were dents in the icebox door.

When it was over, or when Aunt Alice started to cry, his uncle would cry, too. They'd have a good cry together, and sometimes Mr. Saintsbury would join them, either from where he was, squeezed in the cupboard, or out there in the open where they'd be in each other's arms and soon dancing to the uncle's high-pitched, tenor voice. It was very rare, once in a "blue moon," that Frankie or his father had to come by and beat on the door to break it up. Once Mr. Maher had taken Mr. Saintsbury home with him to spend the night in the bedroom the twins slept in and hear stories about the undertaking business that weren't to be repeated on pain of torture or death. The twins, Little Frankie, Big Frank, and the Missus liked Mr. Saintsbury, as everybody did. He was welcome wherever he went.

The day after the first day, and right after church, the Low Mass where his uncle would stand at the back and skip out when he'd heard enough to "absolve" himself, as Aunt Alice would say, of the guilt of a mortal sin, although incurring some other blot or fault for arriving late and leaving early, and never

making his Easter duty, Mr. Saintsbury took off his Sunday best, although Uncle Tom hadn't seen him yet, and put on the overalls and paper hat and snuck down cellar to finish his work. No one had seen it because Uncle had fallen asleep on the couch with a burning cigarette and the fiery hole burnt in the carpet had started a ruckus that didn't end that night. The boy had heard such bad words, and there was no crying or dancing to iron things out. In the dark—and even in daylight, the cellar was dark—you could hardly tell the difference between the patch of green and all the blue, but the green window you noticed right away, with green light coming through it except for the bull's-eye left unpainted. Mr. Saintsbury hauled himself up on the trunk and put his eye to the hole. The snow that had fallen during the night, turning the streets into slush, was a smooth blanket on the grass. Little hats of snow covered the undertaker's rocks. Mr. Saintsbury laughed, and it felt good to hear the laugh because the house was so quiet. The house was so quiet, you could hear the ham and cabbage boiling in the Dutch oven. Uncle Mike hadn't come back home after church, and Auntie Alice had taken the boy home, but gone out after to buy a pie at the Italian bakery.

Was Mr. Saintsbury looking through the right side of the hole? Here the world was green, but there it was white. Green was the membrane, rounded like a globe that divided cellar from yard. In it was the perfect picture of life. He had painted it himself and would keep it to himself, so even when he heard the halting steps of no one other than Auntie Alice trudging down the cellar steps, he kept his eye attached to the hole and the work of his life.

"You!" he heard behind him, and at the same time, the hearse backed out of the garage. "You scheming little brat!" he

heard, as the hatch was opened up by two top-hatted men, Frank and Frankie, if you could see their faces, which he couldn't, and yet how did he know for sure? He knew. A stiff breeze was blowing in the cellar, a whirlwind, and he felt his collar and the cloth of his shirt grabbed and he himself pitched, thrown, fallen and broken on the pebbly floor, with a kick planted on his bad side, the side where everything was barely connected. "Bad boy," he heard, as he rolled into a ball.

And tumbling down the stairs came his Uncle Mike, shouting words Mr. Saintsbury had never heard before, even from his own father, and gathered up in his arms the painter, kissing his face.

Five years old and painted the basement green was a story he still heard bandied about in his honor, so many years after memory of the aunt and uncle had faded to nothing but the names. They had gone out, one by one, the front door of 54 and into the garage door of 52; out that door and across the street and into the church door. From there, Maher, son only, as Frank was gone the same route, drove them to St. Pius, one by one, and side by side, they lay with room for Mr. Saintsbury on top.

It was the most exciting day of his life. How to explain that to his high-hat friends who bought his works on paper when they couldn't afford the daubs on canvas, wood, or glass with always that supplement, a "commentary," the critics called it, on the verso.

Forced as he was by day to scrape what he could with the putty knife and swab what he couldn't with a rag and bucket of turps, when he was the end-all and be-all of his aunt, then slap it back on in the evenings, when Uncle Mike had the presence of mind to tackle the cellar steps without tumbling, in answer to the smell of turps penetrating the kitchen smog and the den's

beery smoke. "Put it back!" handing him the can with green thicker and grainier every day. When the can was dry, he bought another can, but Mr. Saintsbury never got farther than the square by the trunk and the window with the bull's-eye. They all got tired of this game and thought of new ones, and when the Saintsburys wanted their baby back, he wouldn't go.

[2]

Another way of seeing it was this: he was eight and his sister, the tramp, drove him to school, the special school on Francis Street for the deaf and crippled. She had her own car and a one-room apartment over the toggery shop. Father Bill Sullivan was bringing her back to the church, step by step, inch by inch, as Moe of the Stooges would say, but Mr. Saintsbury's mother still wouldn't look her in the face when she stopped to pick up the boy in the "bedlam" that was their early-morning kitchen. Deirdre was forever stealing a blouse or ribbon from Cookie, or scarfing up the fruit on her breakfast cereal. Mr. Saintsbury's father, Jim, got up on the wrong side of the bed and exchanged hard words with his mother, in tears nine times out of ten before the family was even out of the house, radio blaring the news, sports, and weather, and Barb grabbing him by the arm before her father could work himself up to a rage. He liked driving downtown with Barb, a cute girl with wavy hair, perfume, scarf, and earrings, even in the heat of the summer. He settled into his seat to enjoy the ride, looking out the window at his city. Barb worked at the gas and electric and, every morning, placed a lipstick kiss on the good side of his face. She opened his door and waited until the chair came to exchange a remark with the custodian who pushed it.

Good at his lessons, better than he needed to be because just

sitting there without dropping your head on the desk or falling out of it was enough for them, he waited all day for his beautiful girl sister to come back at the tail-end of her day. At first, she'd be cranky and short with him. Sometimes she didn't say a word the whole ride home while he counted up motorcycle cops, garbage trucks, and cement mixers; convertible cars, diners, and Greyhound busses. But when they got to her roomette, she'd cook up some tea and serve him a few stale cookies—gingersnaps or pecan sandies, which tasted good stale or fresh, put on the radio for Hit Parade, and wait for the phone to ring. Father Bill came every or every other night, and Mr. Saintsbury heard, until he was blue in the face, how he'd be crucified if he so much as breathed a word at home. No one understood him anyway, even at the school for gimps and retards. He could quack like a duck and bark like a dog, but his speech was a long, tangled-up string of gobbledygook. He knew what he thought, but even he couldn't hear what he was saying when it came out of his mouth. It made him laugh to the point of tears sometimes. "Spit out," Barb would say. "Spit it out!"

Was he getting worse or better? Some days worse, some days better. His Ma, his Dad, his uncle and aunt, his great Uncle Tom, and his four sisters wouldn't say one way or the other, although he could read their faces and what he learned from that! Fr. Bill was working with him on the catechism because why shouldn't he make his first communion like other boys and girls his age? He knew all the answers to all the questions and Fr. Bill knew that he knew, but they had to think of some way to prove it to the monsignor who'd make the decision. There were four vestment colors: green, red, white, and black. White was best and black was worst; black was for the dead and white for Christmas and Easter and feast days of that caliber. Purple

was in there, too, but not one of the four major suits. Important numbers were three, seven, ten, and four, a cinch to remember and hold up the right number of fingers. He knew what a rosary was and not to hang it around your neck, to kiss the toy at the end, and rub the beads one at a time. He had his own black string that his aunt gave him when they "removed" him from the premises of 54, kit and kaboodle. The doctor had to check him head to toe to make sure he hadn't been "manhandled." He was okayed, but Uncle Mike was never the same—water on the knee, shingles, lumbago, and one of the last TB cases in the city. He said goodbye to his favorite with a mask over his face, dragging an oxygen tank behind him. Mr. Saintsbury never saw his Uncle Mike again, but all they said was pray for his soul. Aunt Alice holed up in 54 until she moved in with her maiden sister on the parkway. The Mahers eventually bought 54 and moved in, leaving the whole of 52 for the business. No one blamed Mr. Saintsbury for the "fallout," as they called it, because no one knew about the paint job.

[3]

"Lovingly, Aunt Alice," was how the Christmas card to the four sisters and Mr. Saintsbury read, and there was a hole to see the five fresh two-dollar bills tucked into the card's fold. Mr. Saintsbury used his for a bag of marbles, green and blue—clear except for the ink cloud of color. Cookie would lift him off his chair so that he could roll the marbles on the carpet. He had a game with four balls in play, first jumping around the little squares on the border like Parcheesi, then rolling them all out and using a yardstick to play pool without pockets—a disaster because the balls would be lost under the couch and behind the cabinets, or out in the open for someone to slip on and fall. His

big sister, Anne, was engaged to be married to Al Magruder, a house painter with his own truck and a girl to answer the phones and do the billing. That was Anne's job right out of high school and one thing led to another. The wedding was set for January at the Club 44 and Mr. Saintsbury was going. At first, they thought he couldn't go, too much trouble, plus the family was still trying to put its best foot forward, as he heard his father say. But in the end—without Mr. Saintsbury having to lift a finger or put on a face a mile long—he was in. Anne wanted him, her baby brother—so what if he was a midget, a cripple, a retard, and a spaz. She wanted him (here, her father put his foot down) in the wedding party, as a partner for one of the sisters. ("Not me!" they said in unison, and Mr. Saintsbury couldn't help but laugh, which made it all seem like a joke and not a slap in the face.) Barbara was coming. At first, it was over his father's dead body, but Mr. Saintsbury's mother worked on his father with four points. Barbara made more than the rest of them put together with two jobs and counting cash for Sunday masses and keeping the pastor's books; she'd taken the pledge and kept it for a solid year; she was making Anne's wedding dress and the bridemaids' dresses and; four, Anne wanted her for her maid of honor. She, Barbara, would roll Mr. Saintsbury up the aisle in his hired tux. It was miracle, and thanks be to god, he was still alive and with them for another year.

Anne was a beautiful bride and so were Cookie and Deirdre, in their turn, and their turn came not so long after. What Mr. Saintsbury liked about a wedding was the feeling it gave him to see his sister a bride, all in white, with just a hole in the white for the face. Even the hands and feet were covered in white and a dangle of white flowers hanging down. In their white—Anne, Cookie, and Deirdre were all the same thing: brides. They were

quiet whether that was their nature (Anne) or not (Cookie and Deirdre). Their father was quiet, too, as he handed them over after the walk down the aisle, although Mr. Saintsbury could see him muttering something as he did, some warning or curse, although the smile was pinned on his face as if made to order for the day—which it was. Barbara would wheel up Mr. Saintsbury, who was part of every single show, and turn him around so he could see, then she'd go back to take the bouquet or to make sure the flower girl and ring bearer behaved. I do, they all said, I do, in a quiet, scary voice. I do, and Mr. Saintsbury said it to himself each time: I do. How do you do? was one of his favorite greetings, although hardly anyone used it anymore. When people bent over to shake his hand in the receiving line, he said it, although no one could make it out. Their eyes glazed over or they looked away.

There wasn't one thing about marriage that the twelve-year-old Mr. Saintsbury didn't know from growing up with his Uncle Mike and Aunt Alice at 54, and watching 52 from the window. The things he saw at his sister Barbara's when Father Bill was visiting were not marriage. Some people would have called them a sin because Barbara had taken the pledge and Father, Holy Orders, but Mr. Saintsbury had no doubt that before marriage and after confirmation was a spread of time set aside for this, if you had the desire and knew enough to hide it. There was nothing in it for him, which is why people let him see. Marriage was when one half drifted down the aisle in white and—like Uncle Mike—never came back, or not the same way they left. The women and girls of the family built up a pile of clothes, mostly nighties and housecoats, and folded them into a chest with dishtowels and bed sheets. This was supposed to do them, with the wedding presents of spoons and knives and mixers and spatulas,

for a lifetime. Once gone, they lived in their own house with the groom, who was just some kid or door-to-door salesman or housepainter like Al Magruder, Anne's husband, and you only saw them once in a while like great Uncle Tom, now in a old-age home, getting set for the ride to 52.

[4]

Mr. Saintsbury was fifteen and still a small boy when they came to get him for the sheltered workshop. He loved the sound of it. In his mind it was like the manger where the Christ child was born, just a roof over your head and four poles, shared with other "shut-ins," which is what they called him. The bus came to pick him up with the special ramp for his chair. He sat clamped onto a rail, looking at the back of Gene Hanrahan's head, slopped over on one side. Gene had been in a car wreck and was a vegetable but eligible for the workshop because he could be loaded onto a chair with the right tubes, bags, and pails. The back of his head was different every day—sometimes Mr. Saintsbury could see the swirl of the Fibonacci sequence, other times the kid's hair was a mat of greasy stripes, one or two rising in the heated air of the van, rising and falling and rising again. Out the window was his city, twenty times more interesting than it had been. Tumble-down, rat-infested, boarded-up, seedy, a wreck, and a disgrace—these were the words people used to describe downtown, where the workshop was, and other things like workshops, now that the department stores had closed down. Grass was growing where it shouldn't and ugly trees springing up where no one wanted them; the streets were full of potholes and Mr. Saintsbury's chair would dance on its rail. He laughed to see Gene Hanrahan's head flopping in a rumba-beat on his shoulder. Mr. Saintsbury was going down-

hill, too, and fast. He had braces fitted to both chicken legs and a corset like the one his old Nana wore. Every part of him was braced and tied down, all except his hands, which were still free as birds and often trembling like birds' wings until they found a medicine better than the old one. The medicines were different colors: a pink, gunky liquid, blue pills, orange pills, white pills, some shots to be delivered by his sister, Carol, divorced and now living at home with Baby Linda, the fattest and noisiest baby Mr. Saintsbury had ever seen, and he saw a lot of the baby because only Mr. Saintsbury could get her to sleep, rolling back and forth on a strip of rug in his chair. The baby liked to hear the soothing sounds that came from Mr. Saintsbury's toothless mouth.

Barbara had moved out of state and wanted to take her baby brother with her, but no go. No one was moving him again, said his mother. Besides, Barbara didn't even go to church anymore and was still living with the bad priest, who wasn't a priest any longer. She had told him she'd get the rights to move him out of the pigpen he'd been living in, with no privacy or facilities tailored to his needs. He listened to the conversations—fights, they called them—and heard the "brute facts." He cried to hear them. He was baggage and undeveloped and never would develop; his face was too small for his head and his feet with more like flippers, or maybe they (Barbara) had said slippers. It was Barbara who was naming the facts and making them all ashamed of how they had lived, and if they thought this was life, she'd concluded, they were crazier than he was.

But he wasn't crazy, and no one who really knew him thought he was. He told them this in his own words and the loudness of them woke the baby up, sleeping in a cradle next to his chair. Barbara washed her hands of him, and that was that, at least for then.

Once he knew his conditions were bad, shameful—that he was soaking in his own urine, with his skin all broken and rashes and sores from the braces, and nothing to support his head—he made up his mind to go out on his own. The workshop was his mother's idea—she read about it in the paper, read it out loud so his father could hear, and Mr. Saintsbury made such a ruckus in his chair and with his speech that she read it again and showed him where it was on the page enclosed in a black border. Then she told the social worker and, presto chango, here he was, three times a week on the van, on his own in the world he'd loved the minute he saw it through the bull's-eye in Uncle Mike's cellar window. That was his first real job and this was his second.

Barbara wouldn't have liked the "conditions." Here everybody soaked in their urine and sometimes urine and worse things on the floor. The aides were rough, all heavy men and women with problems of their own, as he heard them say—money problems and other kinds. Some of them had spent time in the hospital, in prison, and in halfway houses. The first time Mr. Saintsbury heard this word, he laughed because he could imagine four ways of seeing it. It was half a house with no roof or second story; it was halfway finished with no sinks or plumbing; it was half one thing and half another (he took time out from his gimp to visualize this kind of house: half a three-decker and half a shack; half a trailer and half a haunted house; half a barn and half a gas station). He was laughing so hard at the halfway house he could see in his head that the aide who mentioned spending time there turned his chair so he faced the wall for the rest of the morning, there where the vent blew red-hot air over his face.

When they turned him around after lunch, it was time for afternoon crafts and games, and Mr. Saintsbury had projects everyone was eager to see him finish because people had put

a claim on each one. With the bright green paint that he preferred to all else—and, at first, they had punished him for hoarding it by giving him a pot with nothing in it but tap water—he was making a design on a sheet of construction paper of every kind of leaf he had ever seen—on trees, on the ground, in baby books read to him or little Linda, as well as ones he imagined were growing somewhere on the earth that was both flat and round. He made mistakes. Sometimes his leaves were actually the bare skeleton of a winter tree, like the one outside their parlor window; sometimes they were in the shape of birds or animals. These were not leaves, but he allowed himself to draw them and put them on the same page with ordinary leaves. These were the "designs" that the aides were going to frame or sell or take home and put on the wall or the door of the refrigerator. The sheltered workshop had a Christmas bazaar and some were set aside for people to bid on. Mr. Saintsbury would not be hurried. He accomplished one of these in a full week of attendance. No one at home knew he was doing this because they wouldn't let the shut-ins take home school property in the form of supplies or finished product.

There was nothing Mr. Saintsbury couldn't draw, although he drew only one thing at a time. Through the bull's-eye he had seen five things: snow, dirt, trees, cars (limo), and stiffs on wheels. It was a flat world in a round hole, and no matter what he drew (or painted), these were the coordinates and he was a wheeled stiff himself, looked at from the other side, the wrong side of the hole.

[5]

Then, Barbara and the bad priest had their own baby, and Mr. Saintsbury was called on to stand as godfather. No one

objected because his father was gone the way Uncle Mike had gone, via 54 or 52, because the undertaker operated under both addresses. Mr. Saintsbury couldn't believe what they'd done to his old house. All the mortuary work was done in Uncle Mike and Aunt Alice's cellar and first floor, and Mr. Saintsbury's father came out looking like a million dollars, or so people said as they passed over the head of Mr. Saintsbury in his chair to pump his mother's and sisters' hands, after they'd stopped a minute to say a prayer and gawk at the old man on his satin pillow. Up close, the casket looked like a small bed with a wood blanket pulled up to his father's waist, and a blanket of flowers over that. The ribbon said DAD. It was Mr. Saintsbury's first wake and held in his first home, with his family united because nothing would keep sister Barbara away, and old Aunt Alice, who arrived "pickled," as usual.

Mr. Saintsbury sat up in his chair with his painter's hands folded in his lap. He watched the mourners file into the rows of chairs and look at his Dad in his cradle, or stare at the family all in black or blue. Mr. Saintsbury's eyes were open and nothing was denied him. He listened, too, as he always had to what people said about his father's sorrows and the cross he had to bear. There was a cross in his father's hands, so he was taking it with him, into the hole where Uncle Mike was. Mr. Saintsbury closed his eyes to see what that hole would be like in summer and winter, lying in those wooden boats—because when it was closed and wheeled across the street, it was more like a boat. Mr. Saintsbury wore the white gloves of a pallbearer and was wheeled up next to the casket with the professional pallbearers —the only son.

[6]

And then, the dream was over. Each of the girls had at least one baby. Barbara had one, Susie, and the rest had more than they could afford, according to Mr. Saintsbury's mother, who lived and breathed to criticize. This is what the sisters said about her. They all came to visit for Sunday dinner, for Easter and for Christmas, bringing their "armies." Even Carol, who'd remarried a friend of a friend, had an extra one. Mr. Saintsbury was the man of the house and had been for some years. He was bringing in some money, too, and who would have thought that would ever happen? It was true. Mr. Saintsbury's mother doled out some of this money to the church, but some she put in the bank for a rainy day, when Mr. Saintsbury would have no one to look after him the way she had.

The workshop days were over, but Mr. Saintsbury still missed going there, both the trip and the days spent in the company of his peers. He was a shut-in again, although that name wasn't used. You could be called handicapped, or different, and that could mean many things. He felt the same. Pain was the name they gave to the shooting stars that burst under his skin morning and night. The organs inside (how many he didn't know, although they were visible to him and had been framed in the gallery downtown as works in tempura) were roped in pain, and he pictured them either as tied with rope or packaged in a tight tweed. The braces were gone, and Mr. Saintsbury's legs and arms were left to their own flopping shape. The brush arm alone had a machine with straps. The machine body was melted down like wax and then fitted to Mr. Saintsbury's pure white arm. All these years the arm and its hand had been the color of alabaster, a bridal white. The arm had not aged one year, although the

man-boy (or the boy-man) had gotten twenty years use out of it. It was into this very same bone implement that Uncle Mike had placed the new paintbrush from Benny's. It was not so different, some had said in this later part of life, when people said exactly what they pleased, from strapping a brush onto an elephant's trunk or tying it to the tail of a cat. Mr. Saintsbury was told, especially by Barbara who "stood up for him," not to pay attention to such jealous talk, but he had always paid attention and "no harm done," as his favorite Uncle Mike had said way back at the beginning, when Mr. Saintsbury was a tyke, and before he became all the other things he was going to become.

He had nothing to do but to pay attention—think of it that way, and life had offered just enough. It was a short life, but he'd had his own bed to sleep in and "a roof over his head," and something, don't forget, for him to ride around in.

Kiss him now, and say goodbye. Goodbye, Mr. Saintsbury. Can he hear you?

The Night Before

Tomorrow was the first day of elegance. The husband-to-be was blondish, shy, rumored to have a little money in the bank. She was to be propelled from the cluttery house of her mother and unmarried sister into open bridal spaces. He seemed alone and waiting for nothing more than her.

She didn't sleep that night, listening for the last time to the house she grew up in. The floorboards groaning as her mother padded to the bathroom, the fridge turning off and on, bedsprings compressed and released. In her warm bed she lay, creamed and curled, shaved and manicured. She wore one of her sister's nightgowns. It was blue, borrowed, and old. She didn't want to waste anything fresh and packed in tissue paper.

She knew she was good looking and that men liked her. It had taken years to refine her looks and clarify her presence in the world. Her mother's look was limp housedresses and cottony hair; her sister carried fifty pounds of excess weight and dressed in dark solids. Respectability was Anne's, the sister's, guiding dream; money to shop at the A&P and put meat on the table at least once a day was Anne's, the mother's. The bride-to-be was

fifteen years younger than her sister, who seemed more like a mother.

Madlyn lay in bed. She'd stopped listening to the house. Her idea of stretching out her name to fit the person she'd become was more maddening than ever because her married name, Reed, offered no luxury of extra syllables. Madlyn Reed was as skimpy a name as Madlyn Burke. As a teen, she'd tried out Lynn, but her friends, Eileen and Mary—still her friends and tomorrow serving as maid of honor and bridesmaid—couldn't remember it long enough to call her that so others could hear. What they heard was MAD-lin, which is what Terry Reed called her.

She could hear the clock ticking, Baby Ben. The alarm had been set for six thirty a.m. The nuptial mass was at ten. It was only two now, and Madlyn's ears quickened when she heard steps, her sister's heavy tread, almost indistinguishable from her mother's, in the hallway. She waited for the strip of light to fill the crack under her door, but the walker kept walking in the dark. Madlyn waited to hear the toilet flush or that door to open and close, or the springs on Anne's double bed to creak under her weight. When she heard nothing but the ticking Ben, she swung out of bed and opened her door to see a fan of light streaming from the front room, where the wedding presents were lying in white and silver boxes, open to view on the aluminum utility table. Madlyn heard nothing, not even the rustling of paper.

She left her door ajar. Her husband-to-be had rented a floor in a three-decker overlooking the parkway with its stone viaduct. The furniture—what they could afford to buy with her savings, his salary, and the promise of wedding money—was installed; the couch, still in its plastic, the tables and chairs draped in dusters, and a few dishes, pots and pans, linens and blankets

(shower gifts and hand-me-downs) lovingly placed in cabinets and closets Madlyn and her girlfriends had scrubbed and lined with shelf paper. The beautiful things were kept safely here at home, to be transferred after the honeymoon. On the utility table, covered with a lace tablecloth, were silver-rimmed ashtrays, a coffee service, place settings for six, Belleek candy dishes, stainless steel flatware, candlesticks, wine goblets and highball glasses, and twelve different bone-china teacups from the girls at work. There were figurines, vases and planters, a punchbowl hung with cups, a Waterford pitcher and Hummel bride and groom. There were tablecloth and napkins tied with ribbon and sets of brass and leather coasters. Madlyn ran a mental eye from one end of the table to the other.

She waited in her dark bedroom, then heard footsteps pad to the kitchen and out again. Now Anne was back in the front room. Madlyn could hear the clink of glass and then she got a whiff of gunky pink polish. She found Anne with the box of ashtrays on her lap and one in her hand. She was rubbing the silver rim with a cloth.

"I've got nothing to do," her sister snapped. "And I couldn't sleep."

A reply was on the tip of Madlyn's tongue, something sharp and in a style used by Terry and his friends—and unheard of at home—but Madlyn was awake enough to stifle it. Her sister's face had looked belligerent, or maybe she was just embarrassed. People Madlyn's age were intimidated at first by her older sister. She was a "big woman," as their father said so proudly, and stood very straight. She'd been kind to Madlyn, if by kind you meant standing in for her mother at school, in Girl Scouts, and as a chaperone when the seniors went by bus to Washington,

D.C. Until she told them, classmates coming to Madlyn's house for the first time thought Anne was her mother and the older woman, her grandmother.

They thought that until they heard Madlyn call Anne Anne in a tone that was neither daughterly nor sisterly. Madlyn's girlfriends, Eileen and Mary, loved Anne Burke and they showed it. Anne to them was the ideal parent: indulgent, funny, and not strict or grouchy or moody like other parents. Madlyn had said it was different to live with her, but she never illustrated her case with instances. Anne Burke seemed to adore her baby sister, to live and breathe through her exploits, her conquests, her successes. Even when they weren't successes, in the friends' critical eyes, they were claimed as such by Anne for Madlyn.

Who had waited just long enough, it seems, to reply: "okay, all right, no one's criticizing."

Madlyn needed her beauty sleep, as people said and said again, but she sat down on the couch, pushed as far back as it could go to allow for the heavily laden table. Next to the couch was the box of index cards used by Anne to keep track of presents and their origin. The system would prove useful when Madlyn was back from the honeymoon with time to write her thank-you notes. If it had been Anne's wedding—and they had both laughed at this concept, although Madlyn had laughed first—she would have had them written before she walked down the aisle. They might even be written (they laughed more as the joke thickened) the minute the presents were received—licked, stamped, and sealed for the post office, to be mailed on the wedding day plus one.

And now here she was, Madlyn thought, polishing the ashtrays before they'd been dirtied by a single butt. They didn't

need polishing. The polish, she was thinking and her eyes were saying, would make the goddamned ashtrays look used! So, she did say it, or something like it.

But Anne was sure that her skill at removing every drop of the thick, pink polish and buffing the rim to a silvery smoothness beyond anything the jewelry store could manage with salaried help would make the objects seem of higher quality than what Aunt Jane and Uncle Joe could afford to give the bride and groom. Now *that* was an absurdity, and Madlyn used the word: absurd. Anne looked up over her glasses. That was when Madlyn saw, or thought she saw, that her sister was crying in that way she had of letting her eyes flood over, then dry up just as suddenly.

Madlyn looked away. Under the overhead light's frosted globe, and through her own myopic eyes, her presents looked like a landscape in white cream, a lovely sight.

"Do you want me to put on my dress for you?" she said, startling herself by the idea. She was not a "thoughtful" girl, or so everyone liked to say. She was not like Anne, always ready to "put other people first."

"Wouldn't you have to take your hair down?" said her sister, practical and always thinking ahead.

It was just enough to stop Madlyn in her tracks, or slow her down. She picked up the fat coffeepot and planted eight fingerprints around its chromium middle. It was shaped exactly like an egg, and it pleased her to see her face reflected, the curlers like a crowd of widgets or an electrocution hat.

By tomorrow, all this would be gone—the preparation, the scaffolding—and her hair would be soft, smooth, and shiny, her skin that lovely ivory color it had when she was agitated and holding herself together from inside, which was what she'd have

to do to be the person she was supposed to be tomorrow: frozen, perfect, an idol.

"I won't have to do that," she told her sister. She was up and out of the room and now in her own room on her last night home, relieved at the thought that the door that wouldn't shut all the way but jammed itself on the threshold would be a thing of the past, a dream or funny story like the ones she'd already told herself since the day Terry Reed proposed. They were seated in a boat, and Terry was rowing them to the island for a band concert. It wasn't their kind of music, but fun to sit on a blanket on a mild, not torrid night: summer was over and Labor Day long past, although Madlyn was wearing white and white shoes. Terry had slipped off her shoes and put her feet in his lap. He said he had a question to ask. Stroking her bare white feet (she'd deliberately left off stockings because the night was warm enough), and then lifting her onto his lap, he said, in the most romantic voice she'd ever heard: "Darling. Will you be mine?"

She said yes, and—hearing her own answer—wondered if he meant marriage and not just another sign of love. But there was, thankfully, a ring with a respectable diamond solitaire—not big, but not small—and set in 18-carat gold. And it was a new ring, not his mother's or an aunt's old jewelry reset in a modern style. It fit, too, and it was on her finger and glistening under the light of the park lamps when he said: "I couldn't very well ask your father, but I spoke to Anne."

It didn't spoil it, but the thought (even now) of Terry talking to Anne about proposing to Madlyn made her jump up from the blanket to show her ring and pass the news to their friends, Don and Irene, who had rented their own boat and were necking on a blanket a few yards away, where the park lights weren't as bright. Irene tried on the ring—not on the left hand; that was

bad luck—but Irene didn't want to end up (or so she said) with a grease monkey like Don, "so, don't get any ideas," she said to him, and he laughed. Don and Irene were having a real affair with overnights in a motel cabin off Route 1, but Madlyn was waiting for marriage, although she wasn't going to wait forever. She'd been dedicated, as a child born in the Marian year, to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and had been dressed in nothing but blue and white until she was in first grade. A vow was made at seven, when she received First Holy Communion, to remain pure and chaste, and she'd kept it. She was never, like Irene, so in love as to make it a challenge. And she and Terry had been seeing each other for less than six months. He never pressed the issue beyond a certain point. He liked the way she was, aloof and lady-like, and warm enough when the occasion warranted. Like the time they were skiing up north and rolled around in the snow, or lying on a raft on top of his almost naked body while the setting sun sizzled on the water.

It was exciting to think about, those prospects just over the lip of tonight and part of tomorrow, and forever after that. Terry Reed was her type to the fingertips: collegiate, although he hadn't been to college, and well-dressed (he worked for a men's clothier). He had had his own car since he was old enough to drive. His family had lost their money in the depression, but they owned their own house and the one next door. Terry had a widowed mother and a married sister living out of town. Madlyn looked up to Catherine, who'd married a naval officer and was as lah-de-dah as the rest of the Reed aunts with their furs and summer homes and real jewelry kept in a bank vault. If Catherine Bolger looked down on Madlyn and showed it, Madlyn refused to take offense. Her sister-in-law had declined the offer

of attending the bride, but had sent the spectacular Waterford pitcher now standing dead center on the front room table and soon to be placed on a lace runner on the dining room table of solid mahogany. Anne considered Catherine too hoity-toity "for words," but they'd gone to high school to the same nuns and befriended the same two sociable Sisters of St. Joseph.

Anne Burke had kindly seated herself at a table with Catherine and her husband, Bill, along with Mrs. Reed. She hadn't expected to be part of the wedding party and had settled that awkward business as soon as she got the news of the wedding date. "I'll be free to visit with the groom's family," she'd said. Otherwise, the tables were set aside for either the bride's or the groom's party.

There was no situation that Anne Burke wasn't equal to, or so she thought. Madlyn could think of a few, sitting on her bed in the dark, contemplating the prospect of placing the elaborate gown over the head of curlers, contemplating situations Anne knew nothing of, and never would.

The immaculate splendor of the dress was preserved by a bed sheet that had been twice laundered in Ivory snowflakes by Madlyn's mother. It was fastened around the hanger with a diaper pin. The skirt was stuffed with tissue paper and all that had to come out. Madlyn let the stuffing drop to the floor. She wouldn't bother to re-insert it for the few hours left before it was time to put it on for good. Over her head went the petticoat and down the full length of the nightie, which Madlyn hadn't bothered to remove. The starched nylon was scratchy, but the slip Anne had bought when she was as slim as Madlyn protected the freshly shaved legs from the bristles. Madlyn felt the cool silk against her skin. And now, over the petticoat went the dress.

First, Madlyn positioned it on the bed. No, she didn't want help, she told her sister—and her mother was there, too—behind the jammed door.

One arm was plunged all the way into the narrow, binding sleeve, and that made it hard to maneuver the other arm through the fitted bodice heavy with facings, overstitching, and a layer of seed pearls, to find the other sleeve. And now she was caught inside the dress—both arms and head! One brush roller dropped through the hole of the skirt to the floor, another was stuck between Madlyn's back and the ungiving fabric. And that was totally absurd. And this, like the other, was entirely Anne's fault, wasn't it?

Wasn't it? she sobbed through the dense roll of suffocating fabric.

And there was nothing for it but to yank the goddamned dress up in the direction of the sleeved arm, and higher, tearing something in it, and up higher, until she was finally under the tent of the skirt and free.

Free to yank out all the rollers until every last one, with their pins, was scattered on the floor and the tender scalp scratched clean.

No, she would not let them come in because there were two of them and there was no room. It was her wedding and her dress to smush and wreck if she wanted to.

Puffed out on the floor, the dress looked stunned, but not defeated. Madlyn snapped on the light. It was almost as big as a person, and nearly standing in place on the throw rug.

"Come on out, baby girl," her mother was saying, as they pushed open the door just enough to see in. "Come on out and have a nice cup of tea with your sister and me."

"Go to bed!" Madlyn said. All the life had gone out of her. Hearing that, they pushed the door wide open.

It took more than tea, though, to smooth things out. "No damage done," their mother kept saying, as she looked everywhere for the right shade of silk thread to sew up the dart burst open in the bodice. But damage was done. A night that should have been for rest and quiet dreams was spoiled, and the dress would never be the same. The mother's shaky hemstitch would create a subtle difference—even if it was invisible—between the left and right sides of the dress. And she didn't want them handling the dress, even though she hated it. It was not the right kind of dress for the wedding Madlyn wanted. It was fussy and stiff, looking more like the pathetic, ornate gowns the nuns saved up for novices making their final vows. And the wedding tomorrow (today!) was not going to save her from anything that was here. But look, here was the dress—inside-in and right-side up—it was fine. You couldn't tell it had been ripped; you couldn't tell anything had happened. When Madlyn had inspected it with dry eyes, inside and out, Anne carried it to her own room to hang there safely through the rest of the night.

Their mother brought out a silver salver with her best glasses, a bottle of Old Crow, and the ice-cube tray. They laughed to see the old ice-cube tray, but that was just like their mother. It was too crowded to sit comfortably in the front room, so the three Burkes moved to the kitchen. Madlyn let her mother hold her hand on the kitchen table while Anne rolled up the hair. After the nightcap, Mrs. Burke went into bed. Good night to her girls, sleep tight for tomorrow would be a long, exciting day. The street lights were still on, but the sun was almost up.

Ocean State

When he saw what his wife had turned into, he wanted to kill her, or at least bring her down a peg. She had ways and ways within ways, and there wasn't an honest bone in her body. She changed, too: every year she was different, with novelties and odd ways of holding her head and crinkling up her face into that year's smile. All he could do was watch and wait. It would take all of a year for him to catch up, and what else did he have to do with his time but watch and wait.

He loved watching and he loved waiting. He understood time and what could be done with it, while all she did was fold it, race through it, ball it up, and throw it away. For him, each minute had two surfaces—the velvety flow over the top (through the moment with its fan of pure and perfect seconds), and down into the nap where his memories, dark and rumbly, would take him and he'd be lost for a week. The fabric of his time, all snagged and buckled, fouled by that second run-through that wasn't a run-through at all but a dive.

But he loved the feel of his time pulling on him, so he stood on the surface looking down, but not going down.

His memory held everything he needed, but there was too

much of it and it was stretchy and slack in places, treacherous to the smooth time above where you could skate free and formal. He liked formality. She didn't.

They had started out the same: young, but he never changed. He was still the striking blond boy, that stripling youth. He saw the world through his frown, a crinkle over the eyes that made the people who broached his circle stop and think. It gave him time, that frown, as it stopped them in their tracks.

To ward it off, she blinded herself, made a hole in her sight exactly his shape. He fit through it and passed out of it. She had studied it for years and had that keenness, plus the will power.

They'd started out the same: young, but she was old now and cannier than ever.

He had all his memories, but they didn't include her in their early days. He jumped over that and took his stripling right up to now, with just a few stopovers in between—the war, his first job, his second job and his third job; his first and only house and the beautiful stone under which he would be buried with the cut-outs he started out with: a mental case of a mother and a father who gassed himself in the family car, a sister with a destiny a whole class above his head, with her heels up there where he could hear them unless he turned the volume down on that and everything else. He was going under there with them, and he was ready. He had a place made of blond wood, a boy's underground shack. They were his neighborhood, nothing more and nothing less.

She was going, too, but that was her business because he was going first and would be fast asleep down there when she came with her equipment.

He was sitting in his usual chair where he had a view of the space around him, a perfect view because she was gone on one

of her timed outings. He timed her because she had no sense of time. He clocked her ventures out and reeled her in by mental telepathy, which he always had in spades. He could haunt people with it, her and her children, who were also his, but especially her. He couldn't stand her, but couldn't stand being without her.

Was he an artist type? He had a written a poem in a spiral pad and rhymed each line to taste. He could sing and had a high tenor voice and he knew how to wear clothes—or he did before she started buying his clothes and dressing him in sweatshirts and pants that flapped around his legs. He'd prefer a plain sweatshirt, navy, white, or gray, but each of his sweatshirts had a name scrawled on it: Boston, Seattle, New York. She bought his clothes in the junk shops or mill outlets she preferred. There was always something wrong with them—the label upside down or a little pocket in the stitching, two linings or no linings. Out of malice, he wore these clothes and nothing but. Once in a blue moon, she bought him something good, a Harris tweed or London Fog. He kept his shape (whittling it down every year); she didn't. She was an egg and he was a twig. All his people had discouraged this marriage, and they had treated her like dirt under their feet, and soon, treated him that way, too. He took it, she didn't. He looked up to them—the maiden aunts and bachelor uncles, the ones who'd made good (like his sister married to an army colonel), and the ones who still lived in the old neighborhood, when everyone else had moved out when the first trace of the "element" moved in. She looked down.

Why do you have to look up? she asked him. That was a question that didn't deserve an answer. Why did it not deserve an answer? If she pursued him in this way, he could uncork an explosion of fiery words that would wound her in every tender

spot she had, and there were fewer tender spots as she got older and smartened up. Now she was tough all over, an armadillo, he thought, and laughed to think it. He was, in his way, an artist type.

Now he was seized up. A coughing spell that started on the roof of his mouth, agitating, bit by bit, the tense, vitiated length of his windpipe on which he had lavished so much smoke and beer. He still had the beer, as much as he could drink in a day (six or seven cans, if she didn't stuff him with eggnog, meat, and bread). He was smart enough to pour the beer in first and bubble away, burping and sneezing, but not coughing: coughing was something else, a catastrophe every time. And now, with no one to watch or hear, he was at it. He knew the drill. A tickle could set it off, then, before long (time was lost, sense was lost, his eyes rolled back in his head), the cough would engage inside and outside, all-out war, louder and louder, gathering force, until his eyes, streaming tears, popped from his head and his feet lifted off the floor (if they were there) or levitated from the hassock, pounding up and down. Often, his whole insides—whatever he ate or drank in the last twenty-four hours—would rise and fall, rise and be choked back, and nothing you could do about it; let it out and be free for the subsidence that would take half the morning, as the agitation slowed, calmed, and broke itself up, length by length. What was supporting this effort? He'd always been able to make it and make it through, his face bathed in sweat and his chest convulsing, his legs shaking and the cold of the day (even if it was summer) rising up from his feet in their thick socks and sneakers. When he was done, he was done. And done for. Not much life for the rest of the day. In the old days, when his kids were at home, the household would stop, they'd all stop in place, waiting, listening, and hoping for it to be over

so they could wind themselves up again. Pretend it didn't happen, although he never pretended. He was its author, its author and its victim, its commanding officer and its grunt. It was him and him all over.

But, today, he was alone, on his own. Who was he? He was himself. He had two names, the one his people gave him, younger brother, stripling, and the one that grew on him as his hair got grayer and a bare spot appeared on his crown. He had three names, because he changed his first name from two syllables to one. He was three things: stripling, younger son, and old buzzard. He liked being old because it went with being sick. Being sick, or "forever ailing," as she put it, went with being tired and grouchy, or improved on it, gave it character. Now, of course, it was overgrown; there was too much of it, and the long rest coming to him was needed, a dream come true. Or, if not a dream, a way out. He wasn't sure he wanted to go, but go he would when the offer came.

He'd always been willing to take a chance on a good offer. Had he been offered anything good? He counted up his assets: three jobs and a house of his own, respectability—in that, when the "element" came in, he was already out. He had produced (with her) four of his own kind, but were they his own kind? Of his son, he was sure. Of his middle daughter, who brought to bear a family face and style he hadn't seen since before the war and only on one side of his family, the side that had warned his father not to marry his mother, he was sure. The other two, oldest and youngest, were ragpickers, like her people. They came from out of state and they moved around, unlike his people, who came over on the boat and aimed themselves at this little state, where they could all congregate in one neighborhood and one parish, kept in line by the priests and nuns who came over

with them. And the barkeeps, because his little state, facing the ocean and the old country across it, had its own brewery, named for the Indian tribe long gone when the immigrants from his island trickled down, followed by others less desirable, to put it mildly. And he could be mild. That was his gift. He could be strong, but he could be mild. Which he would be was up to what life offered, or what she did.

And the "she" began with his mother, gone now for fifty or sixty years, although still a threat.

He dreamed about her every night: big, with big white dresses and a face that could stop a clock. Gray bun and hairnet, always a hairnet, and glasses. She could send him across the room with one whack of those meaty arms, and yet he loved her, loved her so much that he dreamed about her every night. She had a bad stomach, like his, and the rotten lungs, and went mental after his Dada died. People blamed him for his own death, for taking his own life when that was the way to get the insurance money to flow and pay the bills on the bankrupt company his granddad had founded. He still remembered the day he left. He did say goodbye, and when he, the stripling, came home from school, he went to look for him in the garage, where he could hear the motor running. It was something to even have a car, much less the garage to put it in. But why he was starting out so late in the day, and with the garage doors closed, was a mystery, solved only when the stench of gas sent him into the house, coughing and crying, and sent someone else out, the man upstairs, who picked up a shovel, just in case. No one used the word, but everyone knew what it was, but to this day, he, the stripling, didn't understand how his Dad had gotten to where he was, under the same stone with the rest of them in consecrated ground. No one said anything in those days, but the body was first laid out in the front

room with candles and flowers, an awful scent that he'd never forget, even when it was replaced by worse.

Now he was sitting in his favorite place, his chair, with his feet up and tears running down his face and they weren't from coughing, although the coughing would cover him, if she happened to walk in and spot them.

He hated her guts when she surprised him like that, waltzing in when he least expected it, before he'd willed her home with his mind. The minute she came in: questions, attacks. When did he eat and what. How much did he get down. But he had his ways, too, and places to hide what he didn't eat or even taste, places she wouldn't think to look. Flushing down the toilet was easiest, but then the toilet had to be swished and sometimes he didn't have the energy to do more than flush, holding onto the sink, panting from the effort of walking with a full plate lifted from the rotor of the microwave. She insisted he heat his food. He never did. Food was food. You either wanted it or you didn't. Anyone in the army could tell you that. You either wanted it or you didn't. And most of the time, he didn't.

An empty stomach was a quiet stomach, and his was very rarely quiet. It made no difference if he woke it up with one beer or two, with three or four. Or with five or six, he said, singsonging for his head, because, according to her accounts, he had only six, the six she bought for him every day, come rain or come shine. But he could get out of his chair, off his ass, and drive his own car to any number of spots (omitting only the place where she bought his six-pack) and enjoy a couple there, or bring them home and leave them in the trunk or in the shed, or under the bed, or in the coat closet, or under his chair. The trip would "knock him out," and that was a clue for her, but anything could knock him out—the paperboy at the door, who

might like to come in for a chat, the neighbor across the street, sitting on his porch, the phone ringing. Just getting up to take a whizz could leave him flat on his back, huffing and puffing.

He was getting closer to his goal. He'd said to her: "Do you think I'm going to die?" She steadied herself: this was new, although not entirely new. Nothing with him was ever entirely new. He made use of what he had because he had so much stored up, but this approach, this wording, was new. She steadied herself because she knew what he wanted: sympathy, and that he wasn't getting. After steadying herself, she faced away and said, rotten egg that she was: "We're all going to die."

A zinger. He on his last legs and what does he get: a zinger! But, first time he heard it, he hadn't the energy to drive her to the wall with an avalanche of abuse. He just sighed, because his sighs were expressive, so he sighed again and clucked. "Thanks," he said. "You're welcome," he expected to hear, but didn't. When she turned around, he got everything he needed. Her fat face was white, and she didn't go out that day, which limited him to the six, but it was worth it.

He tried it again, of course, tried it out because it was good: it said in plain language what was there staring them in the face, or at least staring him when, getting up of a morning and gripping his dresser with both hands to collect himself and to suck into his lungs what he needed to get from one minute to the next, and unable to lift his head, a familiar thing but heavier with each passing day, he looked in the mirror and saw the fact. The bedroom was dark because he liked a cave and liked to shout from the dark and stop her in her tracks.

He tried out a different version on one of the ragpicker daughters. First, he hunted up an old phrase: he was saving up "for a rainy day." He said this in his loud, penetrating voice and

the ragpicker stopped what she was doing. She was a born addict like him and a glutton for punishment. He waited, then he added: "but, don't you think it's getting a bit damp?"

She tried to throw it off, but he could see he'd struck home. She laughed and he knew she got it and was siding with him, although they had an old wartime truce, a gag order. They didn't need words: they could read each other's mind. Her mind connected to his like one puzzle piece to another, and he knew he'd gotten through by the sound of that smooth, satisfying snap.

But it didn't matter that they connected. He wanted to jolt the other one, his keeper, his slave, his cellmate, the one going under with him, when it was time.

How many tricks did he have up his sleeve? And how good were they? He had plenty, and who knew if a new one might not dawn on him some fine day when he was free for long enough, and well enough, and sober enough to think one up. What would that be? What could he pull?

He had always wanted his own life, a life of his own, but there'd always been someone else in it to wreck it. It was a case of too much or nothing. He was a magnet for trouble. Even disabled like this, he could create around him chaos, a mess, turn people inside out. His children had flown off as far as they could and still be citizens of his country, and yet he could pull each string, give it a little, innocent jingle or pull the rope right out of their mitts. They hated him when he pulled it hard, leaving it loose and dangling from his hands, with little bits of their flesh and blood, but they came back for more. The hardware store, his favorite after the packy, had plenty of rope. The more he pulled, the more they loved him, and the better he tricked them. And why did he trick them? His eyes filled with tears, as they did so often in these lonely days, to think of how he tricked

them. It was his food and it was his air. She could defend herself, they couldn't. They could shut him out of their lives for days, weeks, months at a time; she couldn't.

He had no relationship with God, although he'd known the man, always changing his shape, his whole life. He was born into the man's family, but only a distant relation, like most Americans. He was out there somewhere making his own kind of trouble, his finger in every pie and there were ways he could reach you. That's what the nuns and priests were for: his agents. They kept their own set of ropes, jingling away, or tugging. He'd let the rope down from his hands when he was overseas and never thought to pick it up again, although the drafty church, like the school or grocery, the barroom and the barbershop, was an old familiar, and before losing half his weight and half his stomach, and most of his breath, he'd worked there of a Sunday, taking the seat money, or running the basket in and out of the aisles, collecting raw cash or envelopes with dollar bills and quarters inside. You'd be surprised to see the things people threw in the basket. Toward the end, he'd filch the gumballs, keys, candy bars, balled Kleenex and toss them back at the morons who'd tossed them in. He'd always had a temper, but he liked to uncork it at home, leaving the outside world as his oyster. And it had been.

But soon, the doors closed around him and the house was his ship, this chair, his wheelhouse, but where could he go?

There was just one place left to go, and if and when he lacked the oomph to launch himself out of here and into the front seat to travel the roads in that unique style of travel he'd developed: starting and stopping, going slow and going fast, creeping and jolting, enjoying every step of the way, well—. He knew everybody on the main street in the cheap, rustic town they'd moved

to when she retired. He forced her to. If she spent eight hours away, he had those eight hours to unravel and even he was surprised at how far he could go. He didn't want to go that fast down the drain, or cuckoo, so he reeled her in, and she let herself be reeled. And they put together their clockworks to string out his life for as long as it'd hold. She was sturdy and could play it out like a master. He let her. He wasn't ready to go. But she gave him time to meet all the tradesmen and mechanics, shopkeeps and agents, gas station attendants, workmen, waiters and barkeeps at work along the street. He paid them visits and they appreciated the gesture: the purchase, the tip, and the courtesy of passing the time of day with someone who didn't rush you or talk down. This was his oyster and he was their oyster, a breath of fresh air in a long, tedious day.

And this is how he made himself happy: he sat here and drew out his thoughts, satisfied himself that he knew his life, wasn't afraid of it, could enjoy its length and its heft and be glad—because he always was—that it was over, or almost. And not a minute too early, because what was left either to do or to be able to do? What was left was him, and he was still all there, in both senses of the word.

But looming in front of his eyes and dimming the light he liked to sit under warming his head, making the news, which he switched on at noon, fade in and strike out again louder than ever, was her. It was like a dream because she wasn't really there. It was like a dream because who was it, which one of the hers? It had the deep, dark circles of the ragpicker girl, the egg shape of her mother, and the white dress and cement cheeks of his, with spindly glasses magnifying her eyes. He couldn't get used to this, not even if he tried, so he closed his eyes and used his rake-like

hands to grip the chair's thick arms. It was coming, or she was. To his rescue? He could still think clearly, or crack a joke, if it was a joke. His heart started to beat (had it stopped?) in a hectic way and he was swamped in sweat. Where was he? He wasn't sure even of his chair and he'd sat in it for ten years. It was there, but fading in and out as his person, or what he thought was his person, grew heavier and, with that syncopated beat, stronger. How could he be stronger? Was he crazy? He threw that one out to her, as she approached, growing clearer but still changing from one to another in a lifetime of three. Get out of here! he felt he said. He thought he heard it, and his arm flapped up from its perch to enhance the effect.

This was the time to bring in the man from the church, a man not unlike himself, stuck in there, living in a gold cup or a pyx and locked up in that box like a house within a house. Bring him in and sit him down. They'd lost touch, but he had a lifetime guarantee insuring that a line was open if he wanted to jingle it, and maybe he did.

No need because he was already there, in the other chair with his feet up. And if there was a cold one in the refrigerator, he was welcome to it. Help yourself, because he wasn't able to wait on anyone, including you-know-who.

And now, of all things, someone was knocking. Pounding. It sounded like a sledge hammer on lead pipes. Noisy—it was unbelievably noisy! Who was making that racket? With the pounding came a hurricane wind, and he'd lived through many a hurricane. He knew how they push their way in, no matter how many sandbags you pile up and how much lumber you nail on. It all made him feel very small and very light, lighter than he'd ever been.

If only she'd move off, get away and get out of his sight, but she was closer now, and her name was Mary: that much was clear from the inane and stiff look on her face, just like a statue.

Hell, now they were all here and the lights went out.

They sat in the dark, in the wind and the pounding sea. Was it the sea? He'd always lived near it, knew it and respected it. It washed through him and cooled the fever, softened the hectic heartbeat, slow now as the surge of a family of waves, slower now as the double return of the tide, slow as you like, and even slower.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges serial publication of the following stories:

Boulevard: "Family Happiness," "Family Romance," "The Offering," "A Full House"
Gargoyle: "The Tree of Life"
The Hopkins Review: "Welcome Wherever He Went"
Ploughshares: "The Sweetness of Her Name"
The Urbanite: "Dream Date"
Yale Review: "The Wedding Gowns," "Transference"

FICTION TITLES IN THE SERIES

Guy Davenport, *Da Vinci's Bicycle*
Stephen Dixon, *14 Stories*
Jack Matthews, *Dubious Persuasions*
Guy Davenport, *Tatlin!*
Joe Ashby Porter, *The Kentucky Stories*
Stephen Dixon, *Time to Go*
Jack Matthews, *Crazy Women*
Jean McGarry, *Airs of Providence*
Jack Matthews, *Ghostly Populations*
Jack Matthews, *Booking in the Heartland*
Jean McGarry, *The Very Rich Hours*
Steve Barthelme, *And He Tells the Little Horse the Whole Story*
Michael Martone, *Safety Patrol*
Jerry Klinkowitz, *Short Season and Other Stories*
James Boylan, *Remind Me to Murder You Later*
Frances Sherwood, *Everything You've Heard Is True*
Stephen Dixon, *All Gone: 18 Short Stories*
Jack Matthews, *Dirty Tricks*
Joe Ashby Porter, *Lithuania*
Robert Nichols, *In the Air*
Ellen Akins, *World Like a Knife*
Greg Johnson, *A Friendly Deceit*
Guy Davenport, *The Jules Verne Steam Balloon*
Guy Davenport, *Eclogues*
Jack Matthews, *Storyhood As We Know It and Other Tales*
Stephen Dixon, *Long Made Short*
Jean McGarry, *Home at Last*
Jerry Klinkowitz, *Basepaths*
Greg Johnson, *I Am Dangerous*
Josephine Jacobsen, *What Goes without Saying: Collected Stories*
Jean McGarry, *Gallagher's Travels*
Richard Burgin, *Fear of Blue Skies*
Avery Chenoweth, *Wingtips*
Judith Grossman, *How Aliens Think*
Glenn Blake, *Drowned Moon*
Robley Wilson, *The Book of Lost Fathers*
Richard Burgin, *The Spirit Returns*
Jean McGarry, *Dream Date*
Tristan Davies, *Cake*
Greg Johnson, *Last Encounter with the Enemy*
John T. Irwin and Jean McGarry, eds., *So the Story Goes: Twenty-five Years of the Johns Hopkins Short Fiction Series*
Richard Burgin, *The Conference on Beautiful Moments*
Max Apple, *The Jew of Home Depot and Other Stories*
Glenn Blake, *Return Fire*
Jean McGarry, *Ocean State*